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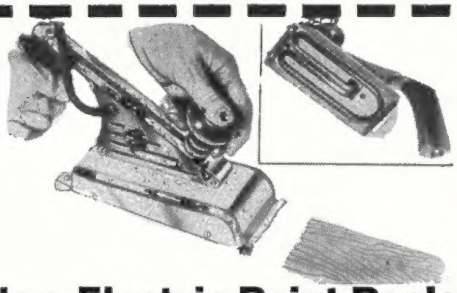

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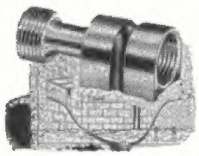

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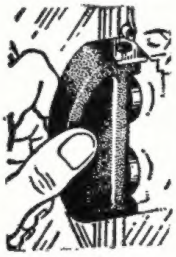

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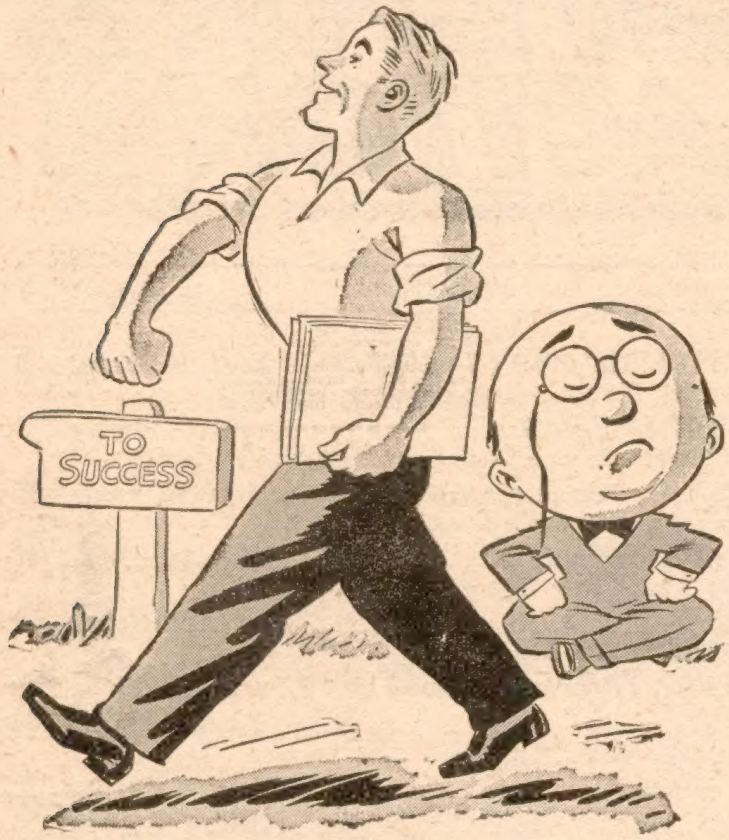

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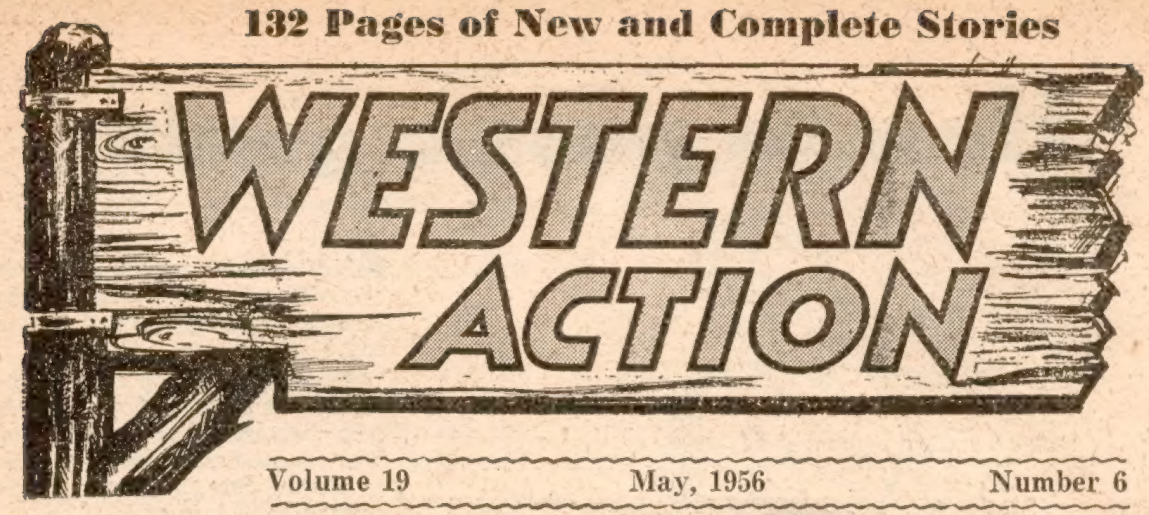

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BLOOD TRAIL FROM THE BRAZOS

by T. C. McCLARY

HE CAME from the rolling grasslands of the Brazos, and he had never seen anything as dwarfing as the Shining Mountain in his worst dreams. For a solid week, he had ridden steadily upgrade, crossing its singed gold and rust escarpment. Now he arrived at the town by the thundering falls; daylight left suddenly, as it does in the mountains, and the rushing river was black at his feet.

The night chill was sudden, and he drew his jacket close about him. He had to lean back onto his cantle to make out the still-gleaming peaks. The strangeness of a new country filled him with uneasiness. The people in the town were like their rocks and woods—dark, closed in; suspicious, clannish.

He bought his drinks and allowed he'd heard that a man thereabouts called Grizzly Bill was a match for any three men he'd ever met. "A match?" they snorted with local pride. "Why no three men who ever dast tackle him could even knock him off his feet!"

"Something to be mighty proud of," the man from the Brazos commented.

"He's proud enough," they agreed, and studied him with secretive speculation. "A big man and a proud man, but mighty fair for all of that."

Brazos' face hardened the slightest bit; he had the word of a sister who claimed something different. Not that she didn't have her own wild streak, or she'd not have run off and been living in Dodge to meet him. But she was honest, and Brazos believed her when she said she had waited two years for Grizzly Bill to come back before she had swallowed her pride and come back home where her kid could be raised decently.

The boys of the town stayed on at the saloon, smelling him out; the town was called Hell's Gate, and it had been well named. Beyond here, the trail pinched in and squeezed between two black upthrusting walls. A mile above,

the trail hung like a thread twisting up into the peaks.

The barkeep commented, "You're not too small a man yourself, friend."

Brazos inclined his head with acknowledgement. He said, "A man's size is not what gives the flavor to his meat."

The barkeep filled his glass upon the house. He said, "No, we've got puny men hereabouts who've licked a grizzly with a knife." He raised his eyes and looked dead into Brazos, then jerked his head aloft. "But I will take my hat off to the man who licks Grizzly Bill with any weapon, or any tricks; his size is just holding pure heart and guts. I don't figure the man lives who could beat him singlehanded."

Brazos sketched a design on the sand-scoured bar with his glass. "Has any real man ever tried?" he asked.

SOMEBODY in the back gusted a rueful laugh—a man with a neck like a bull's, a chest like a barrel, and the solid, log-sized arms of a blacksmith. "I did, and got five crushed ribs and lost most of my teeth for it," he grunted. "I san say it with pride, considering what has happened to some others. A wrestler at a carnival tried to best him once with the mallet trick. He broke the wrestler's head like an egg, ripped down the canvas and broke the mallet man's back, and with four slugs in him, smashed up the whole gang of roustabouts who came at him."

"He was the only man who walked out of the fight on his own feet," the barkeep said.

"Some of them never walked again at all," the blacksmith recollected.

Brazos pour another drink. He said, "I'd take pleasure meeting this Grizzly."

The barkeep polished his glasses a long time and extra hard. The other customers were suddenly silent. Finally the barkeep said, "A day and a half's ride up that trail, and you'll hit Bald Peak settlement. You can't get off that trail without falling off. Eight miles straight above the settlement you'll find Grizzly's cabin. It is the highest cabin in the whole mountains; no man on this continent lives above Grizzly Bill."

"It would be worth the trip to meet him," Brazos grunted.

The barkeep poured him another drink on the house and lifted one himself. "Friend," he said, "it was pleasant to have talked with you. The travelling sky-pilot will be through here in two weeks; you'll get a decent Christian burial."

LONG BEFORE dawn came in this deep valley, Brazos had eaten and saddled; and had chilled impatiently in the thick drifting mists. "Don't try the trail until daylight," the barkeep had warned; but he was restless at waiting for the sun to strike down into this dark, shadowed, foreign world.

With the shredding of mists, he leaned back and studied the thread of trail that seemed to hang from the sky itself. This was a dark, mysterious, brooding world that he was not used to; he thought that a man was a damned fool to come breasting another man in his own eyrie like this—but it was a matter of honor that had to be settled.

He could feel strain pulling at his eyes and tension in his neck, but he gave a man's tight, grim smile and stepped into the saddle. Within five miles the trail turned wild and precipitous as a goat path, and he rode most of the way with his saddle horn pushing in his belly.

He did not exactly arrive at the settlement; the settlement arrived around him. One moment, he was utterly alone in the vast, pervading silence of the heights—or so he thought. Then the trail was pinched by rock and timber and a harsh voice called out, "Halt!" He saw guns and eyes in the deep shadows of the evergreens on every side; he was surrounded—but only one man showed in his path.

The man was young and afoot and he had the body of a walking man, V-shaped and solid clear from husky shoulders to his ankles. He showed neither friendliness nor truculence, but outright, suspicious curiosity. He asked, "What would your business be up here, stranger?"

Brazos sucked a deep breath into lungs that labored at the altitude. He answered with a flatted tone, "I have come calling upon a man who lives near here."

"A man," his interrogator repeated. "There are quite a few men hereabouts, but all of one family."

"There is only one I want to see: His name is Grizzly Bill," Brazos told him.

The man's eyes sharpened like steel points, and then suddenly filled with humor. "Why that is different," he said, and made a gesture to pass along the trail. "You will not find him here at the settlement—but you had best stop for a rest and to catch your wind."

He gave a sharp whistle, and men detached themselves from rocks and trees, lowering or cradling rifles as they hit the trail. There was no talk amongst them, but one and all, their eyes were sharp, watchful, and shiny black as the predatory birds that dive upon their prey from timberline. In the plains sense, they were not fighting men; they did not challenge for rough and tumble or to meet their glory, man-to-man. They were hunters, and the code of the hunt was their code—don't waste a bullet; don't risk a chance; bead your sights, judge your distance, and shoot to drop your quarry in its tracks.

Brazos could feel danger close around him as surely and invisibly as chill wind. They were bleak men with cores of granite; they did not need affront or anger to roil them. They needed only a word or look or act that rang the bell of their suspicions.

His interrogator led the way in front of him, moving at a dogtrot, like an Indian. Around a sharp bend, the ground opened into a broad shelf, bordered by a sheer-walled glen. Everywhere, there were sheer walls in this dark land of shadow, rock and sky. But there was a green valley beyond, and cattle grazed on the sides of a steep hill. Even from there, he could recognize down-country cattle; he knew then the reason for the clan's alert suspicions.

- 2 -

A STREET of neat log houses ran in a straight row. They pressed close in upon the trail, their yards alongside instead of in front. Midway of the street was a larger building, a store and general meeting house, he judged. Womenfolk were busily ordering the big room and sweeping it out; they turned and leaned on their brooms to watch his approach.

Without exception, the women were tall, strapping, buxom, hippy—a hardy lot, tough of fiber as their men. One amongst them watched him steadily. Her hair was black as a crow's wing, her face exciting and lean moulded, her eyes dark and mysterious as midnight. She was a tall girl, self-reliant and fit for a Viking; she moved as effortlessly as the wind.

"A visitor," the man who had blocked his path called out. "He comes seeking Grizzly Bill."

The tall girl started to open her mouth, then closed it. She regarded him with puzzlement, and more personal curiosity.

The man turned and cradled his gun from habit. He said, "This is McClelland's settlement, stranger, and you are welcome to stop off for decent rest and wind." He turned from the waist and looked almost straight above him.

"Your lungs will need resting before you make that climb." He grinned.

Brazos followed his eyes, but saw nothing except sheer rock, the forest petering out into the scrub. Not so far up lay the white line of permanent ice and snow; he wondered what kind of a man this Grizzly was to live alone, suspended amidst sky and cold and wind.

But the girl was still watching him, and his eyes were drawn back. She knew she had drawn him, and a mixture of pride and satisfaction touched her. She studied him forthrightly and solidly; and then suddenly—just for the barest moment—she let the dark chill of her eyes drop, and the fierce fires he saw within her broke at him like an oven's blast.

It was a thing that struck him with physical impact. He had to shake his head to give decent attention to his host. The man was introducing himself as Robert McClelland. He swept an arm at the rest, "We're all McClellands," he grinned. "And the womenfolk that ain't yet, will be!"

Brazos said hesitantly, "I come from the Brazos."

McClelland understood and nodded agreeably. "That is good enough to call you—Brazos. We ask no man his name or business here, except why he came, and you have answered that."

His escort sauntered up, still weighing him, but more friendly. Robert McClelland sent his young brother off with Brazos' pony. He took him inside the store, at the back of which was a bar. The tall dark girl came in and served them, and poured one for herself. It was clear from McClelland's manner that she was no regular barmaid, and probably was a favored member of the family; yet she stood and drank with the men as one of them, but so also did others of these mountain women who shortly joined them.

THEY WERE readying for a wedding shivaree that evening. Grizzly might come down or he might not—nobody ever knew what Grizzly might do. They spoke of him casually, yet carefully. At the end of two hours, Brazos still had not learned who Grizzly's immediate family were, or even if he was a true member of the clan.

Bob McClelland took Brazos home for hot vittles and a scrub; the girl came in to keep McClelland's young wife company. Abruptly in the middle of supper she looked dead at Brazos and said, "So you came clear from the Brazos to see Grizzly?"

He stopped with his fork half way to his mouth. He met her look with inscrutable eyes. "What makes you think I just came from there?"

Her eyes laughed at him mockingly. "Your pony," she pointed out, "has come a long trail without rest and is not used to rock trails yet."

He bowed acknowledgement. "I will know better than not to answer next time."

He held her eyes a moment and they fenced, silently. She was a girl raised by men and with men, and there was no coquettry or embarrassment in her. She knew men for what they were and probably liked them that way; but she was not easy. She'd decide for herself, and no man would rush her off her feet; he felt her challenge such as no other woman had ever affected him. She was more than something he just wanted. She was something that he suddenly craved and had to have before he climbed the rest of that trail to fight for honor—or a lonely death, as the case might be.

She guessed something of what he was thinking and she dropped her eyes, but an ironic, slightly bitter, smile slanted her mouth. "Grizzly," she said, "has cornered a prize golden stallion in the snows. I doubt if he'll be home this week."

McClelland glanced at her with sharp reproof, but she returned him a look of assurance that she spoke with judgement. She veiled an answer to

his reproof that she'd given out information that might aid an enemy trailing Grizzly. At the same time she warned Brazos of what a stranger was up against in this McClelland country.

"Grizzly couldn't have gone through downtrail," she told her kinsman. "And there's no other way out of the country, except over a cliff. So he's likely still after the stallion, or we'd have seen smoke up yonder."

Then she smiled tauntingly at Brazos, "I don't think your pony could follow on these high trails. I hope there isn't any hurry in your visit?"

"None," Brazos answered, with a mixture of grimness, sadness and relief. At least, he could have his day in court if he was lucky—a few precious sundowns with the girl. She suspected the reason for his visit, even if she had not read him fully; and she could take that in her stride—for all that she was probably Grizzly's kin.

He liked the tough fiber of such a nature. There was a woman who could ride at a man's side and never falter! But once he had breasted Grizzly, things would be a good deal different. Either he'd come back a corpse, or—worse to the girl—a hated victor. He would still probably be a corpse before he crashed through the settlement and the sentinels they must have watching. Conceivably, it could be a bullet from this girl's own gun that dropped him.

He was under no misimpression about the vengeance of mountain clansmen. But this was his first experience with that strange thing of fiery heat and freezing ice that formed a mountain woman; and he had the regret that he had not come here simply as a drifter who could tarry.

HE WAS eyed at the shivaree that night, with looks that put a grim chill in him. Except that he was Bob McClelland's guest, he did not believe his life would have been worth a snowball in Hades. These mountain boys didn't like foreigners to begin with; and particularly they didn't like a stranger making a big play for one of their women.

Some incident happened on the front stoop of the store that he could only guess at from the sound of argument, blunt command, and the rush of pounding boots and the clatter of a rifle on the boards before the argument ended. Bob McClelland came back in, flushed with anger, but somewhat amused now that things were over.

At another point, he caught a drift of argument between two of the young bucks. One was eyeing him darkly, but the other was urging, "Don't go messing into Cathy's business if you know what's good for you!"

And at still another point he saw her bridle and stiffen in argument with some burly cousin. He heard her remind the man, "Don't forget he came here to see Grizzly! You stir up any trouble, Jabe, and by golly, Grizzly will want to know what for you're tending his business for him!"

The argument had effect; the man growled, but slunk sullenly away. Finally, as the heat of the shivaree grew higher and wilder, about half the men put their truculence aside and accepted him as a friendly visitor—for the time, at least.

What he learned of the girl in the wild wheels and circles of the dance was plenty. She was light as a feather on her feet; her body was strong, but supple as a mountain cat's. She had hell's own fire in here; but even breathless and half spent and dizzy, she had the taunting mockery of self command. A man could break his heart out trying to crash through the ice of her arrogant composure, and many were doing just that. But there was something in her dancing eyes which said that the warmth of her nature might surge over a man like a flood—if he was the right man. And her favoritism gave him the hope he might be.

He walked her home through chill grey mists. Dawn lay a clear pink and

golden light behind the black peaks that even here, towered overhead. She led him around to the back door because from there, he could see the valley coming to life, she said.

She stood very still as they looked down into the slowly shifting sea of pearling mists. He held her hand and it was warm and vibrant, and he could feel the pull of her attraction drawing through her fingers. He turned to her, and turned her to him and they stood nearly eye to eye.

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SHE LOOKED at him steadily, and it was the first time he'd seen that hollow expression of a woman's uncertainty in her own strength. Her lips were moist, and a little swollen, and a little cruel as her breath came fast. His hand tightened on her firm, lithe body. He could feel her heart tattooing under her rounded breast, and he knew she'd respond to his kiss like nothing he'd ever had.

She knew it, too, but she was the one who thought ahead. "Do you want it like this—so snatched, so half-way, Brazos?" she whispered huskily.

He looked at her a long moment, and then smiled wryly and shook his head. "It comes hard to say no, but I want all of you."

She closed her eyes; she teetered backward weakly in his grip a moment. Feelings so violent they were almost savage ripped over her face; and then the cool mask of her self-possession dropped back over her. When she opened her eyes, she had herself in hand. "Maybe," she murmured, "we'll be sorry that we didn't take what circumstance offered. But I've always hunted to drop my game where it stood, or not to shoot at all."

He nodded, "All or nothing; I like that." Then he said, bothered, "But I'm still pretty much a stranger to you."

She glanced upward toward the brightening peaks, toward the place where Grizzly's cabin was. She drew a long breath and expelled it, but he could not read her thoughts. "There'll be a few days before you can finish your errand."

He frowned. He said, "None of the others seemed to know as much of his habits or his doings. You and Grizzly are pretty close?"

She breathed a laugh. "Very," she said, but told nothing more definite than that. "I'm about the only one in the clan who isn't scared by his wild bark."

"Grizzly seems to have more than a bark," he growled.

She smiled at him oddly. She said, "Actually, you're a good deal alike."

Then she changed the subject; she made small talk about how he'd pass the time, and promised to loan him a pony while his rested so they could ride over the valley that afternoon, if he wanted.

Their rides through the Valley became daily habit, but he was embarrassed now at mentioning Grizzly, and she herself avoided the subject. McClelland mentioned him briefly in giving stories of his prowess and might, but never slipped in anything personal that told his relationship to the clan; and the other mountaineers were even more reserved of comment.

At the end of a week, about all Brazos had learned was that it was all one clan and that Grizzly was one of them—the clan hero, and maybe the chief when he so willed it. Obviously, they were proud of him, but he was somehow cut of a different mould. He lived alone, when there was no need of it; he had gone places none of them had ever gone. He was a savage enemy, but a solid friend; the clan could count on him to his last drop of blood.

But nobody—not even Bob McClelland—seemed intimate with him. He was a man nobody really knew.

"Except Cathy, maybe," Bob amended once. "They were pardners when they were kids, even though he's five years older. She saved his life once, hanging out of a tree by her knees and hauling him out of a flood."

Brazos' mouth compressed. For the first time in his life he felt the conflict between what he considered his duty, and countering inclinations. He'd come to kill Grizzly, if he had the luck, for a dishonor that Grizzly had heaped upon his family. But now he'd met the girl; and because Grizzly was her pard, he wished things might have been otherwise. If he pursued his intentions, everybody was going to lose —no matter what the outcome.

But, there was no honorable way to turn about; his destiny was crowding him.

THE FOLLOWING week, he saw a wisp of smoke high on the mountain above rising like sheerest gossamer against the incredibly clear mountain dawn. He asked Bob McClelland about it, but his host evaded a direct answer. Later in the day he asked Cathy flatly but she told him somebody was just camping up there, or warming the cabin. Grizzly, she said, always sent her word of his return.

It was bad subject for them both and wrapped them for their ride that day in heavy silence. At sundown, Brazos saw the smoke again and felt puzzled and uncomfortable. After supper, Cathy dropped by and he would have spoken, but she beat him to it.

She said to Bob, "That fool Abe's gone up on the mountain again after that snow cat."

Bob grinned, "The damn fool; he'll freeze to death! No wood above snowline, and he's too damn lazy to tote oil and blankets."

Cathy laughed, "Don't fret about Abe freezing; he's headquartering at Grizzly's. Like as not, he's drunk up half Grizzly's best corn by now, and half eaten him out of supplies as well."

The whole family laughed; Brazos chewed his lip and guessed that was the explanation and told the story of the smoke. He was jumpy, though, for the next two days. The smoke had set his reactions into movement; and more than any impossible thing he'd ever wanted, he wished there were some way not to go gunning after Grizzly—for the girl's sake.

But there was no way out of this, none that he could face within himself; the pressure of it spilled over the night as he walked with her along the gorge that ran behind her cabin. "Cathy," he asked, "what would you do if you loved a man but on account of things you maybe couldn't understand, your man went gunning for Grizzly?"

She looked down into the black pit of the gorge for a long time and she was still looking there when she answered low, but strident, "I'd shoot him if he lived, but he'd never live, Brazos."

"Would that make you bitter at Grizzly?"

"I'd understand it, but things would never be the same again."

She stopped dead in her tracks and turned to him with a sharp intake of breath, as if she'd speak. Then she looked into the starwashed shadows of his face and the breath dumped out of her. She clasped his arm tightly. "Why think of that?" she asked with deep disturbance.

He squeezed her arm and mentioned it no more; they were silent until they reached her back door, and stopped only long enough to arrange an earlier ride next day. This time she took him straight across the valley and up into a little park that seemed hanging from the clouds—a beautiful place carpeted with thick grass and heavy moss and ferns. Dark evergreens fell back in a spicy scented wall from the clearing, where a scattered stand of hard-

wood trees filtered the sunlight and scattered its gold upon a crystal brook.

ANTELOPE grazed unafraid at the far end of the park; the bird, got used to their presence and darted through the air with their glad chirpings; and all of the countless small creatures of the woods came to watch them curiously while they fished for rainbows. None of the brooding, closed-in, shadowed mood of the mountains touched this open space. From here, they watched the sundown splash its furious pagan colors like organ notes through a distant crimson bordered, purple notch.

She brought up Grizzly's name herself; she said, "It's why he lives up on that cold shelf all alone, but the rest of them wouldn't understand it—just so he can sit outside his cabin and see the sundowns and the moon rise. He said he couldn't live in the settlement —it's like a box to him."

Brazos looked at her with surprise: she painted such a different picture of the man than the rough, callous one he had in mind. He would have answered, but suddenly she looked at him with haunted, stricken eyes. Then she clasped arms around his neck, sobbed once, and her vital lips were seeking his. In her passion was everything a man might ever want, except that it would not last. But now, for this night, this park was their world alone, and she was utterly, completely, and passionately his.

They got back very late. The chill of dawn was already a cold blanket upon their flesh, and the grey vapors were rising out of the gorge and spreading out across the valley. They walked hand in hand to her door and kissed, and stood there with the thoughtful smiles of two people who have known a possession so fiery that it would consume most mortals.

She raised his calloused hand against her cheek, and then she kissed it. And then she said, her tone dull and her face turned down, "I will take you up to Grizzly's in the morning. He was back, Brazos, but I was selfish."

She looked at him then, beseechingly. "Is it so wicked to want one little memory to cherish?"

"Good God, no!" he breathed, but brokenly, for the news crashed upon the tenderness of his mood like an avalanche of rock. He wanted to say things, but he couldn't; he wanted to crush her to him, but the mountain had dropped its dark sheer wall between them.

They looked long at each other, and then parted without another word or smile.

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MIDWAY of morning she came riding to Brazos' door and sat waiting while he saddled up his pony. McClelland was out in back chopping wood and stopped to come over and help —exactly as if he knew the whole story, although Brazos had not even told him he was riding up to Grizzly's.

Brazos mentioned that he'd had a pleasant stay, thought of offering cash, then remembered the strange pride of these clansmen. Instead, he gave McClelland a boot knife that he'd admired. McClelland took it in his hands with gratitude, turning it over and over as if it were something delicate.

"Like I've heard tell Bowie's knife was fashioned," he murmured, hefting the long, well balanced blade.

Brazos nodded. "Copied right off the original by my pa."

"You're an honest and generous man," McCelland said: "I would wish you luck if I could." He cocked back his head and looked up meditatively at the heights. "You'll find a man of the

same ilk up there," he said, "whatever else you've been told."

Brazos face hardened; he did not answer.

McClelland expelled a long breath. He looked Brazos levelly in the eye and extended his hand. "You have passed uptrail as a friend," he said. "I cannot promise what it will be should you come back this way."

There was no other way out of the country, and Brazos nodded grim understanding. He saddled up, stepped into leather, and wigwagged. McClelland gave him a man's hard, realistic grin and lifted his arm as Brazos touched his pony and trotted to the front to join Cathy.

They passed through the one street of the town, women darting to every window, men stopping work to stare from every yard. A few lonelier cabins reached for a half mile out of town; then there was nothing but dark evergreen forest, shadowed silence of the highlands, and bleak grey rock. They rode without speaking. Shortly, the trail grew so narrow and precipitous the girl took the lead and they rode in single file.

It was, he felt, like riding up into the sky itself. This was a different world, disconnected from the plains and prairies. This was land of the hunter, and the hunter's violence was cloaked in cold patience not the hot anger of the cow country.

They twisted up a last half mile with their ponies straining to hold their fore quarters down. The trail bellied and flattened abruptly into a pocket size meadow, with a barn and corral beside the trail. Six ponies were grazing in the meadow, but none of them was a golden stallion.

"Grizzly missed him again," the girl commented, dismounting. She gave Brazos a rigidly contained smile. "We walk from here, friend."

He nodded and got down and put their ponies in the corral. Cathy led off into the blue-green shadows of the forest. Except for their breathing, there was not a sound. No desert on earth held the dark brooding silence of these heights.

A deep voice out of the dark green wall hailed them, "Howdy, Cathy; been kind of expecting you."

Brazos' head snapped sidewise in spite of himself. Almost he reached for his gun.

He saw Grizzly's eyes first, clear blue as a child's. Grizzly was cutting sign on him with a mixture of curiosity, humor, and something akin to sympathy. He was sitting on a stump, a giant of a man, but big in the way of a big mountain lion—tawny, lithe, lean muscles that moved like oiled lariats beneath his weathered skin. He held a rifle caught carelessly under his right arm, as if not even another man's throwdown would scare him in the least.

THE TWO visitors stopped and Cathy said, "I brought a stranger who has waited to see you."

Grizzly glanced from one to the other and got up smiling. He said, "I'm sure he didn't mind the wait! Friend, you look fried out by suns far south of here."

"The Brazos country," Brazos said with a nod.

Grizzly stopped with his legs spaced solidly apart and reached for a chew. "Brazos?" he repeated, and he looked like a young boy remembering something happy that yet carried bitterness. "Knew a mighty pretty girl who said she came from that country once," he added; "always meant to go back and find her."

Brazos felt himself stiffen inwardly. "Maybe she waited."

Grizzly lifted his huge shoulders and let them drop. He glanced at the peaks around and made a futile gesture of his hands. "You never go back," he said; "but you don't know that 'till it's too late."

He broke off and looked suddenly at

the two of them. "You don't go back," he said, "because time has fallen between you like a fallen bridge."

"Maybe a man shouldn't leave to begin with," Brazos said.

Grizzly gave a sad, half-smile. "He should take his woman with him like a stallion," he philosophized; "like that golden stallion I been chasing. Older I grow, the more I think horses got more sense than men."

Then he stepped toward Cathy and gave her a great hug with one arm and suddenly boomed, "Come get us some vittles to start our talk. I been living on jerky and sourdough 'till I'm plumb sour!"

Brazos said slowly, "I hadn't figured to stop with you that long."

Grizzly glanced over his big shoulder. "Man's come all your distance is entitled to see the world's sweetest sundown! There'll be plenty of time for serious talk tomorrow, friend."

He had Brazos pegged, and he let Brazos know it. Brazos followed the two, feeling the strain of the heights upon his breathing, and puzzled that a man who knew he'd come to fight to the death could take the occasion so casually.

The woods path broke suddenly onto a small, sheltered shelf that hung out over half the whole land west so that a man looked over the tops of the mountains with a feeling of looking down upon a frozen, primeval sea. A crystal creek came from the snowfields above, circling below the shelf like a silver moat that lost itself immediately amidst the deep wall of blue and green.

They all stood on the edge of the shelf a space looking down at it, and Grizzly allowed, "The damned white hell that Cathy saved me from once; it took pluck for a little girl."

She tinted at the compliment. She said, "Nobody can fight a floodhead."

Grizzly chuckled. "Beside which, I couldn't rightly swim. But I learned damned fast after that!"

He turned back toward the cabin. "How was the fishing over in the park?" he asked.

The girl shot him a quick, startled glance and paled. Brazos felt a stab of guilt and with it, a stab of bitterness. He looked at the girl and he said, "If a man lived to be a hundred, it was something he would never grow weary of."

FOR AN instant, Cathy's eyes looked sick with knowledge of the destiny that entwined the three of them; and then she had steeled herself. Her lips were even, and her jaws were firm. From deep in her throat she murmured, "It is a day I will always remember."

Grizzly stopped and leaned with one hand against the door sill, and let his childlike, innocent blue eyes drift over then. "So the rainbows were striking?" he commented. "In ma's day, Cathy, the old folks took that for good omen."

He turned and led the way inside. It was a stout cabin, fashioned tight by a man who took pains and pride in the use of his hands. To Brazos' surprise, it was a five room cabin, and it had the feel of a home that has been lived in by a family as well.

Grizzly set his rifle in a corner and nodded toward a wall peg with a glance at Brazos gun. "You can let off some weight. It will be safe there for when you want it."

Instinctive caution struck through Brazos, but there was a gruff honesty in Grizzly that he had to admit; besides, the girl was there and there could be no settlement of the blood score until she left. Damning himself for a fool, he hung up his gun. Grizzly threw logs on the open fire and nodded toward a bucket seat, sprawling out slack on a half log bench himself to pack a pipe and watch the two with private speculations.

Cathy moved about the place with her light, efficient motions and the manner of knowing every corner of the cabin intimately. She seldom spoke, but her closeness to Grizzly was like the unbroken ring of a circle of fine steel.

It was something vibrant and abiding, and deeper than mere kinship, feeling it, Brazos roughened at the thing he had to do because of what it would mean to her.

In due course she set out supper—antelope and bear and wild goose, and some small, plump woodcock that Brazos had never tasted. Brazos noted that she placed no salt upon the table, and made apology that there was no dough for bread or biscuit. But the meal was a feast, fit for a king.

At the end of the meal, Grizzly pushed back his plate, belched appreciatviely, and said, "Cathy, that would do credit to the Last Supper! After that, any man should be ready to meet his glory smiling."

Grizzly chuckled, but Cathy didn't smile, nor did she look at him. Her attention flashed to Brazos, chewing his under lip and staring at his plate; and emotion beat at the still marble mask of her pale face. She got up suddenly to fetch hot coffee, and without uttering a sound that could be distinctly heard, both men caught the cry in her throat that carried back.

The grin drained off Grizzly's face. He eyed Brazos, and then put his attention on his pipe. "Been waiting quite a spell?"

"Ten days," Brazos muttered through tight lips; "maybe it would have been better if I'd come and found you."

Grizzly pressed his tobacco firm. He said, "It is always easy to look back and see what we should have done, but it don't do any good." He put a flame to his pipe, sucked an even light, and pressed the fire down with his calloused thumb.

He blew against his lips and let the smoke explode through in a cloud. He said, "Trouble with us men, we can't make up our minds when we ought to; and we can't change 'em once an idea's set."

Brazos lifted him a stony glance. "That's about right," he agreed.

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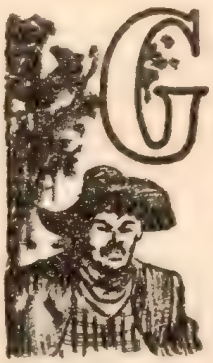

GRIZZLY PULLED a long breath that filled his chest out like a bellows. A man with a chest and arms like that could soak up bullets like a bale of hay and still crush another man's body like an egg. Cathy came back with the pot of java.

Grizzly stirred his cup and asked on a gossippy tone, "Well, what gossip in the settlement since I'm gone?"

She shrugged. "Not much. Clyde's youngest fell off their cliff with no damage, but Clyde busted his leg jumping after him. All the men are getting haircuts, and all the women tidying up for the visit of the riding preacher."

Grizzly gave his deep chuckle. "That will sure be a marrying bee this time! Five McClellands will see their own parents hitched!"

Cathy failed to catch his humor. She lifted her eyes sharply, hungrily, toward Brazos; Brazos looked at her, and then both slowly dropped their faces toward their plates.

Brazos asked with bleak irony, "The funerals or the weddings come first?"

"Either way," Grizzly grunted negligently. Then he said, "Cathy, why don't you take Brazos out to see the finest sundown a lowlander's ever like to see before he dies?"

She nodded and slipped on a mackinaw. Brazos stood waiting, instinct tugging at him to put on his gun, but feeling a resistence to such a supicious affront. In the end, he walked out without arms on him; but the muscles at the back of his neck were taut, for these men were hunters, and the code of the hunter was not that of the cowboy.

She took him to a low drop off be-

neath the larger shelf, a place where they could build a small fire and hunker down, protected from the chill wind drifting down from the snow above. They hunkered in silence watching the white crowned, blue and purple sea of mountains darken, while the crimson sun dropped like blood between the wild land's breasts, fringing the hills with gleaming gold, and splashing the clouds with colors so vivid they had the quality of trumpet sound.

"Every night when we were kids, we all used to come out to watch," she murmured. "Of course, that was before the settlement was built. There weren't so many of us then."

He put that into different values. "You were raised here? With Grizzly?" he asked.

"Where else?" she asked, "I'm his sister."

The fact struck him like a dash of icy water. Somehow, he had figured them for cousins. But sisters—hell, except for time, and maybe the matter of an offspring, Brazos was in the same position as he was blaming and hating Grizzly for. He'd taken Cathy's heart, and she'd given him all that a woman possessed to give; if there was trouble —well, one way or another—he wouldn't be here. From that standpoint, it would make no difference if he were alive or dead.

THEY STAYED on there a long time, silent, but with their tragedy flowing around them like a black river; their emotions were whirlpools sucking them down into depths from which there was no escape, but their hearts were close with the things that went unsaid.

Once he blurted bitterly out of his chunning thoughts, "If I'd only waited the meeting until after the riding preacher got here!"

He felt her go utterly still within herself; and then slowly, and as if listening to a very distant sound, she turned toward him. Her eyes searched his face in the wash of starlight, her eyes were strained, and hollow with fear that he was simply talking. "What—what difference would it have made, Brazos?"

He struck a fist into his other hand. "At least, I'd have left you a decent widow," he grated.

The clutch of her fingers was like an eagle's talons. She closed her eyes and he didn't think she spoke aloud: yet he knew she said, "Thank God, I made no mistake then! Except for circumstance, he would have been my man!"

Then she opened her eyes and gave a sad smile of gratitude for his thought, but shook her head. "No, you couldn't have done what you came to do. If you had, I'd have hated you for life, and if you hadn't, you'd have hated me at times, Brazos."

He said wonderously, "You mountain women are pretty grim."

She said with melancholy pride, "We are of the same bone and blood as our men."

They fell silent again, watching the red moon rise beyond the sootblack roll of the horizon. The night airs grew knifing chill, and they rose and climbed the low step to go back in.

For just that instant, coming over the brim, he caught the splinter of light that would be made by a door closing into the cabin; but when they reached there, Grizzly was sitting in front of the fire, sleeves rolled up, cleaning his rifle.

Cathy said she was tired, and went to her old childhood room, leaving the two men to bunk out in the main room. Brazos lay on his bunk watching Grizzly's enormous shadow on the wall, caught between his own sense of guilt and his stern hatred for what Grizzly had done to his own sister, hating himself; hating Grizzly, and corroded with somber melancholy in his love for the girl.

There was no way out of this without a fight. If he failed to fight, he'd hate her for it, as she'd said. If he fought

and won, he would have to ride back through the vengeance guns of the clan. Probably, it would be Bob McClelland who challenged him first, but even should he best him, there would be others. Finally, he did not believe that he would win, the best he could hope for against an oak-knotted giant like Grizzly was that he could take Grizzly with him.

Grizzly finished with his gun and stretched. "No sir," he allowed, "we're not as smart as horseflesh. If we were, you'd have dropped me when you first saw me in the woods, Brazos. And if I was, I have dropped you as you came up over that rim just now."

Brazo answered leadenly, "That's right, what about the girl?"

"Cathy? What about her?" Grizzly asked.

"We can't have her see this. It would tear her to pieces."

"She has seen other men die," Grizzly allowed, and seemed to consider. "But maybe she did not feel the same." He knocked the nubbin out of his pipe and blew it free and set it on the mantle. He pivoted slowly and stood warming his backside against the fire and looked at Brazos. "So you took her fishing in the park," he said. "All things cnsidered, how does that make us very different?"

Brazos said grimly, "It makes us the same, and I damn myelf for it!"

A BLEAK mile split the giant's rough hewn face. "At least we know each other—and ourselves," he grunted. "Well, truth to tell, I am sorry I didn't go back to Dodge and fetch your sister. She was worth it."

Brazos looked over at him with glinting eyes. He said, "It is not such a long ride to the Brazos."

Grizzly chuckled. "No? Well, one decent thought deserves another. There is a way out of here at night beside that trail. It is the creek, and then there is the river. And a message left at Hell's Gate would reach Cathy privately—if you were ever minded. And if you live."

He crossed the room then and sprawled out on the other bunk. Within minutes, he was snoring. In its way, it was the greatest compliment he could pay Brazos—that he had no fear of sleeping in the same room like that the night before a vowed blood battle.

Cathy got them their breakfast in the grey-blue light of dawn. Her own face was grey and her eyes were granite. Her brother mentioned casually that they had business, and without a word, she prepared to leave.

The town men saw her out onto the shelf. Suddenly, she turned to Brazos and openly threw her arms about him. Once, just once, she kissed him passionately. Then she ran to her brother and kissed him; and then with a bursting cry tearing from her throat, she ran toward the path and was swallowed in the dark green shadows of the woods.

Grizzly looked after her with a frown. "She is mighty secret of her personal feelings," he said. "That is the first time, outside the family, I've ever seen her show her heart."

Brazos bit hard on his teeth and flexed the fingers of his hands. "Let's get on with it."

The giant nodded, "A good idea. But I am shamed in a way that it must be so one-sided. I have no six-gun, I don't use one."

Brazos looked at him with consternation. "You can't fight with a rifle! You'd never get a chance to bead your sight."

Grizzly spit and nodded. "And knives are messy," he stated. "That kind of looks like we go it with bare hands."

Brazos looked at the giant's powerful hands and felt the hair hackle on his neck. Still and all, it might be a break. Most big men were wrestlers by instinct, he himself was a fist man, and the punch could often beat the hold.

He nodded agreement and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. They

stripped their shirts and circled in the early morning sunlight, eyes glinting as they felt each other out.

BRAZOS GOT in blows before Grizzly ever got a hold, but his hardest drives and most smashing piledrivers bounced off the giant as they would off deadoak. They circled, and even with a brow opened and blood flooding across one eye, Grizzly was grinning to himself. Then he caught a hold on Brazos, and Brazos knew the reason. The power of the giant was not even suggested by his size. His strength was colossal, he could had crushed the marrow in Brazos bones.

But Grizzly threw him off, chuckling as he wiped his eye clear of blood. He was enjoying the game and he meant to make it a game. He had no slightest doubt of the outcome. He could break Brazos across his knee at any moment he desired. Brazos darted in like a terrier, though, circling, darting, driving in hurting blows, taking the punishment that came. They fought for an hour and the sweat mixed with their streaming blood and they both looked like muddied scarecrows. Grizzly wasn't smiling any more, his breathing came in a loud whistle, and some of Brazos' blows had told. There was respect in his eyes, but he was still master. He had strength left in him, and Brazos' knees were giving.

They drew off for wind and Grizzly read Brazos' condition and gasped grimly, "Well, I guess it is time to end things, my foolish friend!"

"Yeah," Brazos gasped back. "Long since," and drawing his last strength together, he drove forward with head ducked, ramming the giant in the middle of his breastplate. It was like butting a bull but he heard Grizzly's exploding breath; mind red with last chance desperation, Brazos dug in his feet and flailed and went on ramming, driving Grizzly back to the rim over the rushing creek.

For a wild moment, they teetered on the rim, Grizzly trying to use Brazos for a pivot to swing back around to safety. There was no other way now, and Brazos knew it for he was fogging with fatigue. So he threw himself at Grizzly, grabbing him around the head and kicking at his shins. He felt them both heave over into space as Grizzly's great arms almost crushed his ribs. He felt the icy impact of the water, and then roaring blackness gobbled him.

He squinted dizzily through swollen eyes and thought that he recognized the place. Every bone in his body ached, his muscles felt as if they'd been shredded in a sandstorm.

He realized he couldn't open his eyes wider; he shook his head to clear it, and yelled with the burst of pain. A strong hand pushed his back upon the pillows and held his neck to pour a drink into him. He heard Bob McClelland chuckle, "So you boys wanted to go fishing the hard way?"

The fiery drink cleared his senses and gave him a bolt of strength. In a vague way, he could figure things. The creek he'd dropped them into was the one that wound through the settlement valley and then went into the gorge. He could see better now; and across the room, sitting in a slanting ray of sunlight, he saw Grizzly watching him. It was a solid satisfaction to see what a swollen mess the giant's face was.

Grizzly grunted, "Well, we had our fight and it was good, and no man lives who can deny it just from the looks! Brazos, there is more gut in you than you look. I've had no better fight in my whole life."

BRAZOS SCOWLED, unimpressed by the compliment. "With nothing decided!" he rasped. "It will still need settlement when we mend!"

"Why, for sure, if that pleases you," Grizzly chuckled. "Maybe we'll be ready for it by the time we hit the Brazos, and that is more open ground, I've heard."

"The Brazos?" Brazos repeated with puzzlement.

Then he felt her cool hand on his brow, and Cathy came into his range of vision, and oddly, she looked flustered and was deeply colored. "I didn't mean for the yokel brother of mine to go blurting that!" she gasped.

"What?" he asked, and then from her darker color, he knew, and he screwed a painful grin out of his cracked lips. "The riding preacher and you'll ride home with me? But where does your brother fit in?"

"Why," Grizzly boomed across the room, "You don't think I'd let her ride off with a man whose like to drown getting there? Then I been thinking, Brazos. Sometimes up here folks have to wait ten years to get proper married, but I've heard you've got preachers handy down your way, and there's a little lady I figure might like my sundowns."

Brazos looked over at him solidly, and then his eyes crinkled and he wigwagged. "I think I picked me a good brother-in-law," he allowed.

Grizzly filled the room with his chuckle and swelled his chest. "Didn't do so bad myself!" he boomed.

Brazos didn't answer for he couldn't. Cathy's mouth was sealing his; and from the fierceness of her kiss, he didn't wonder that she kept her feelings secret, and he damned well hoped that she would after this. It was plumb embarrassing to have folks watching you light up like a prairie fire in a high wind. It was plumb indecent—but he sure didn't aim to stop her.

Yes—it had sure been worth that long ride up from the Brazos, and he had something a heap sight better than a notch on his gun to take back home to his sister. She'd like those sundowns of Grizzly's, too; there'd never been another man for her since, and the kid would have a pa to be proud of.

★

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The only reason the Cattleman's Association employed Tombstone and Speedy as investigators was because no intelligent crook would ever suspect they were detectives!

CONTACT IN PARADISE

Tombstone & Speedy Novelet

by W. C. TUTTLE

THE LITTLE lobby of the cow-town hotel in Paradise City was crowded with townfolk, listening to Tombstone Jones' description of what seemed to be a tragedy. Tombstone Jones, seven feet tall in his worn, high-heel boots—and as streamlined physically as a starved greyhound—was anything but rhetorical, as he explained to Horace McGee, the sheriff.

"Me and my pardner are ridin' down the grade back yonder, when all to once we hears shots ahead of us, and around a curve. I says to Speedy, I says, 'Speedy', just like that, I said it."

"My name's Speedy Smith," explained Speedy, who was a five foot, seven inch replica of Tombstone. "He was speakin' to me."

"All right, all right!" snorted the sheriff. "Cut out the frills, and tell us what happened."

"Well, sir," continued Tombstone, "in two shakes of a cat's tail, around that curve comes a horse and buggy. The horse was runnin' away, and—and the buggy had to go along. Oh, yes—there was a man in the buggy, whippin' the horse."

"Prob'ly tryin' to stop it," said the sheriff dryly.

"Nope," denied Speedy, "drivin' a loose line."

"Come to the point!" snapped the sheriff. "What happened?"

"Well, sir," continued Tombstone, "the driver saw us. I don't know what made him do it, but he tried to ride past us, and swung the horse toward the rocky wall on the right-hand side."

Tombstone blew up his lean cheeks, waved both long arms and exploded—"Blooey!"

"The air," declared Speedy, "was plumb full of wheels."

"Red wheels?" asked a man anxiously.

"Shut up!" snorted the harassed sheriff. "What next?"

Tombstone pointed at random, and the innocent bystander at whom he pointed ducked, instinctively. "Just then, from around that curve, came two men on horses—riding high and

handsome, guns in their hands. They seen us, spiked the tails of their broncs, and start shooting at us."

"You mean they shot *at* you two?" asked the sheriff.

Tombstone took off his battered Stetson and ran a finger through a hole in the crown. "If they wasn't shooting at us," he replied, "they're sure awful accurate accidenters. Sheriff."

"And then," said Speedy, "we unhooked a few hunks of lead in their general direction, and they headed back toward town awful fast."

"Wait a minute!" snorted the sheriff. "What happened to the man in the buggy?"

"Oh, him!" grunted Tombstone. "Well, I didn't diagnose him all over, but I'd say he's hurt."

"You just left him lying there?"

"We didn't bring him with us, if that's what you mean."

"Brown horse and red wheels?" asked the man who inquired about red wheels before.

"Brown horse," admitted Speedy, "but no wheels—not as far as we noticed."

"I meant red wheels on the buggy."

"In a case like that—wheels and colors don't mean nothing," declared Speedy. Probably was red— I dunno."

"That was my livery rig, I tell you!" wailed the man. "That dadblamed drummer!" He grabbed Tombstone by the sleeve. "Was the horse killed?" he asked anxiously.

"Well," replied Tombstone, "he wasn't dead the last we seen of him—going around the bend, wagging the shafts of that buggy behind him."

"All right! All right!" howled the sheriff. "Somebody get a wagon! Somebody get Doc Wright! Somebody get—no, I guess we've got enough. Come on."

THE LOBBY cleared quickly, leaving only Tombstone, Speedy, Jim Fisher, the hotel keeper, and a short,

rather fat young man. This last wore big glasses, which gave him an owlish appearance. He looked at Tombstone with a rather sad expression and said quietly, "I am Elmer Moot."

Tombstone shook his head sadly. "I wish I could help you, but I can't. Should have taken it up with your folks long time ago. You're too old to do much about it now."

Elmer choked, and it wasn't gratitude. He said, "Your story is interesting. May I have your name?"

"No, you don't; you use your own name."

"He wants to know who you are," explained Speedy.

"Oh-h-h-h, that's different. I'm Tombstone Jones, born in—"

"He wanted your name—not your obituary," interrupted Speedy.

Elmer Moot leaned against the desk and choked a little. Jim Fisher, an old-timer, glared at Tombstone over his crooked glasses. "I ain't sure that you're trying to be funny," he said soberly.

"You can be," assured Speedy. "Now, do we get a room, Mister Fisher? After all, we'd like to lay the remains down for a while."

"Oh, sure, sure!" Jim Fisher turned and looked at the register.

"I'm a writer," offered Elmer Moot.

"Writer?" queried Tombstone.

"He means he writes for a living," explained Speedy, leaning against the desk and scratching his left knee-cap with the toe of his right boot.

"Who does he write to?" asked Tombstone.

"I'm out here gathering material for a book," grinned Elmer.

"Material? You mean—paper?"

"No—facts."

"Now that we've run that one into a fence-corner," said Speedy, "suppose we concentrate on trying to get a room here."

Jim Fisher turned and dropped a key on the desk. "Your conversation is so enlightening that I almost forgot that I'm running a hotel," he explained. "When brain meets brain, I'm astonished. You take room number six, upstairs. It's between number four and number eight. If you need a guide or a map, I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" asked Tombstone.

"Well—uh—sorry I had a vacancy."

Elmer Moot managed to swallow, drew a deep breath and said, "I'm in eight—and I have to go right past your door. Glad to guide you gentlemen."

"You're a right neighborly person, Elmer Moot," said Tombstone. "Too bad about your name—but we all have a cross to bear, I reckon."

They picked up their war-bags and followed Elmer upstairs. Jim Fisher shook his head. "Either the world is getting crazier every day, or my hearing is failing," he declared to the world. "One man might be that dumb—but never three in a bunch."

ONCE IN their room, Tombstone and Speedy cast their war-sacks aside. Tombstone sprawled on the bed, which was of normal length; his feet stuck far out over the end. Speedy took the only chair in the room, and began lazily rolling a cigaret.

"Well," said Tombstone thankfully, "we're here."

"That's better than a even money bet," agreed Speedy. "What bothers me is that part in Jim Keaton's telegram that told us to use our brains."

"Detectives, like us, always use their brains, Speedy. What bothers me is the other part of that telegram, which said that a man would contract us here."

"The word was 'contact'," explained Speedy. "It means that a man will see us here."

"Oh, that's what it meant. Well, I'll say he'll get an eyeful."

"Lengthwise, at least," remarked Speely dryly, and licked the edge of his cigaret-paper. After some contem-

plation he remarked, "You didn't tell the sheriff about that valise."

"Why should I?" queried Tombstone. "After all, if that speed-happy fool drummer wanted to throw his valise over the edge of the grade and into the canyon, it's his business."

"Yes, I reckon so," agreed Speedy. "Anyway, I don't like the sheriff; he's awful nosey."

Tombstone pulled his feet up and hooked his heels over the foot of the bed. "Sheriffs have to be nosey," he declared. "It's detectives, like us, who keep their mouths shut and use their brains. If you don't mind, Mr. Smith, I'll close my eyes and do some thinking."

"I don't blame you for closing your eyes," said Speedy. "What you think about would be too revolting to look at."

The only reason Jim Keaton, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association, employed Tombstone and Speedy as investigators was because no intelligent crook would ever suspect that they were detectives. He didn't dare clutter up their minds with information; just sent them where he needed men, and let nature take its course. At first he was indignant over their failure to report the closing of a case, but later he discovered that they never knew when a case was closed. In fact, most of the time they solved problems without realizing that that particular problem was the one they were assigned to handle.

Both Tombstone and Speedy were asleep when Horace McGee, the sheriff, and his men came back. The sheriff came immediately up to the room and banged heavily against the door. Speedy let him in, still half-asleep, and Tombstone sat up on the bed, rubbing his eyes.

"Why," demanded the sheriff, "did you kill him?"

Tombstone and Speedy looked at each other, looked at the sheriff and around the room.

"Killed who?" asked Tombstone sleepily.

"You and your cock-and-bull-story!" snorted the sheriff.

"Cock-and-bull?" queried Speedy. "Never heard of 'em, sheriff."

"What did he have that you *hombres* wanted so bad?"

Tombstone got off the bed, flexed long arms and remarked, "This conver-conversation ain't even intelligent. Why did we kill whom?"

"That feller in the buggy—back on the grades. You said he busted himself up against the rocky wall. If he did, why did you two shoot him through the head—after you searched him?"

"My theory is that this argument is becoming revolting," replied Speedy. "We didn't shoot him—if that answers your question."

- 2 -

THE SHERIFF leaned against the door and looked bleakly at the two cowboys.

"Still got your hackles raised, eh?" remarked Speedy. "Tombstone, can't you think of a convincing lie to tell him?"

"I can't even think of the truth," declared Tombstone. "All we done was look at the feller, Sheriff. We didn't know him. He wasn't dead when we pulled out and—wait a minute! Then two men came back and shot him! Maybe they was scared he'd talk."

"Talk about what?" asked the sheriff grimly.

"Sheriff," said Speedy suddenly, "it was our mistake. We should have done it before we left him there."

"Should have done what?" asked the sheriff.

"Read his mind," replied Speedy.

"Let's get down to facts," suggested Tombstone. "Who was the victim?"

"His name," replied the sheriff quietly, "was Julius Silver. He was a traveling salesman for ladies' clothes. Been coming down here for months. Mind if I search your war-sacks?"

"Yes," replied Tombstone, "we do."

"Oh, you do, eh? Suppose I insist on searching both of you?"

"With a search warrant," said Tombstone easily. "You remarked that we searched the man."

"His pockets had been turned out, his shirt torn away, as though somebody had been looking for a money-belt. That's why I asked to search your war-sacks."

"And," said Speedy, "somebody shot him through the head, eh?"

"That's what I said. And at close range, too."

"We never do that," declared Tombstone soberly. "We always get back a couple hundred yards before we shoot 'em."

Sheriff McGee looked at them curiously, rubbed his button-like nose and said; "Just who are you two, anyway?"

"You won't tell, Sheriff?" asked Speedy.

"I want to know for my own information."

"We're dectectives."

Sheriff McGee started to say something, swallowed painfully and jerked his hat down over one eye. He seemed to be suffering a little.

"You—uh—are—well, I'll be going —now. You two won't be leaving town right away—I hope."

"Not necessarily," replied Tombstone.

"That'll be—I say, that'll be fine. Good evening, gentlemen."

The sheriff closed the door gently behind himself. Speedy sat down on the chair and began rolling a cigaret, while Tombstone crossed the room and looked down at the street from the window. "There's no use telling the truth," declared Speedy quietly.

Tombstone came back and sat down on the bed. "I wonder what was in the valise the feller threw over the edge of the grade. Must have been valuable."

"Worth killing a man over," agreed Speedy.

"We might take a sneak out there and—"

"No you don't," interrupted Speedy. "No sneaking, Mr. Jones. That sheriff wouldn't like anything better than to catch us with something that drummer used to have. Let's forget it, and wait for that man to contact us."

"Mr. Smith," said Tombstone soberly, "I bow to superior ignorance. Let's go out and find something to eat."

"Now," said Speedy, "we're getting back to normal."

"It takes a while," agreed Tombstone. "So somebody came back and popped that poor devil through the head. I wonder why."

"Afraid he'd recognized them, I reckon."

"THAT'S RIGHT. Probably some old friends. I wish I knew what he had in that valise. You don't just throw a valise into a canyon for exercise. And them two riders was chasin' him. Yuh know, Speedy, I believe they wanted that valise."

"They can have it," said Speedy.

"But they don't even know he threw it."

"That's what worries me, cowboy; they'll think we got it."

"You mean—they might ask us? They wouldn't do that, because then we'd know who shot that feller. Speedy."

"You know," declared Speedy soberly, "even if your folks didn't drown you at an early age, because they had to haul their water in a barrel thirty miles, it seems a weak excuse to me."

"Let's go eat," said Tombstone. "When you get scientific with me, all you do is make me hungry."

It wasn't a very good meal, but filling. They went back to the little hotel lobby, where they found Elmer Moot sprawled in a chair, reading a week-old newspaper. Elmer said; "Gentlemen, I give you good cheer."

"Some folks," declared Speedy, "are always willin' to give away something they ain't got."

They sat down, and Tombstone said, "Elmer, tell me somethin' about this book you're a-writin'."

"Oh, it really isn't started, yet. You see, I must do reams of research first." Elmer leaned back and looked over the tops of his glasses at the tall cowboy. "You see, Mr. Tombstone, I—uh—really had no idea of using the West as the locale of this masterpiece, until it suddenly occured to me that the West is our real Americana."

"What seems to be your problem, Elmer?" asked Speedy.

"Many things," sighed Elmer. "For instance—and it is only a small instance—why do cowboys wear such high heels on their boots?"

"Well, you see," replied Speedy soberly, "cowboys are all heavy behind; so they wear high heels to keep 'em from fallin' over backwards. Next question?"

"That is remarkable!" exclaimed Elmer Moot. "I had no idea."

Elmer's next question was not propounded, because Horace McGee, the sheriff, and Baldy Blake, his deputy came in. Speedy murmured; "Law and order taketh over."

McGee settled down in a chair, facing Tombstone. Tombstone said; "Somethin' heavy on your mind, Sheriff?"

"I'm frankly puzzled," declared the sheriff.

"I thought his name was McGee," said Speedy quietly.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped the sheriff. "Talk sense. I'm tired of funny cowboys. Listen to me, you two! Julius Silver was murdered on Lobo Grades—and you two were there."

"Partly there," corrected Tombstone. "We saw him spin out of his busted buggy and pile up against the rocks. We took a close look at him, but he didn't have no bullet holes in his head. You can't blame us if somebody came along and punctured him after we left. Now, what's your next accusation?"

"You say you saw two men shootin' at him?"

"And at us," added Speedy. "Don't overlook the personal pronoun."

"All right, all right! Describe them two men."

"They were about this high up from their saddles," explained Speedy, indicating with his hand above the floor. "As far as we could see, they each had two arms."

"Did each one have two legs?" asked the sheriff sarcastically.

"We don't know," replied Speedy. "You see, Sheriff, we only saw one side of their horses. What was on the other side—"

"Oh, hell!" snorted the sheriff, getting to his feet. "Come on, Baldy."

THE TWO officers walked out rather stiff-legged. Speedy looked at Jim Fisher over there behind the desk, chin resting on his hands, glasses on the end of his long nose, tears running down his lean cheeks. Elmer Moot was hunched in his chair having difficulty with his breathing.

Tombstone said soberly: "A fine sheriff you've got here! Asks for a description and then walks out on it."

"I don't know," said Jim Fisher weakly. "I've knowed a lot of dumb cowboys in my fifty years in this state, but you two can act dumber than any two I ever seen."

"For your information," said Speedy soberly "we ain't actin'."

"Well, I'll tell yuh about me" said

Tombstone, getting to his feet, "I'm goin' up and take off my clothes, and lay the remains away for a few hours. If anybody asks for me, I'll be in—in—what is the number of our room, Speedy?"

"Who on earth would want to find you?" asked Fisher.

"Could be the two fellers who shot at us," said Tombstone.

After they had gone up the stairs, Elmer Moot said, "It is barely possible that if I stick around with them I'll learn a lot about things in the West."

"At least, their version," said Fisher; "it might make good readin', at that."

It was several hours later that night when Speedy awoke with the feeling that someone was in their room. He knew that their door was open, because some reflected light from down in the little lobby showed him the open outline of the doorway. Speedy quietly felt for his gun—which he had placed on a chair near the head of the bed, when he heard a husky whisper; "Damned place is so dark—shut that door, you knot-head."

Speedy couldn't see anyone, but he grasped the top bedding and hurled as much as he could toward the sound of that voice. At the same time he yelled shrilly; "He-e-ey! Get out of here!"

A gun blazed almost in his face, but Speedy went out of that bed in a long leap. From the twist and jerk of the springs he felt that Tombstone had done a high dive over the foot of the bed. Another gun flashed, and Speedy dived at the gunman, like a tackler in a football game.

The action was chaotic, aided by the darkness. The one window crashed, a chair splintered. From out in the street came a howl of pain, and the door banged shut. Tombstone fell over a broken chair, swore painfully, demanded a light, and in no uncertain terms.

"Light it yourself!" panted Speedy. "I've got me a specimen."

Jim Fisher came lumbering down the hallway, jerked around at the doorway and yelled; "What's goin' on in there?"

"You'd be surprised," panted Speedy. "Light a lamp and stop askin' silly questions."

Between Tombstone and Fisher, they managed to find a lamp. The room was a shambles, as far as furniture was concerned. Speedy was on the floor sitting on top of a man, who was face down.

"Turn over the dirty drygulcher!" snorted Tombstone.

It was Elmer Moot, staring up at them, one eye almost closed, a smear of blood across his face. Speedy's undershirt was up around his neck, the lower half of the garment down around his knees. Elmer still had on the lower half of a pair of striped pajamas, but the upper half was hanging on the doorknob.

HE SAT UP, caressed his swollen eye and blinked painfully. Fisher looked around and shook his head.

"With only the three of you in here, you sure made a mulligan of my room," he said accusingly. "What happened?"

"Three?" asked Tombstone. "There was nearer a dozen."

Tombstone pointed dramatically at the smashed window, and said; "If there was only three, which one went out the window?"

"Sh-h-h!" warned Speedy, pointing toward the doorway. Someone was coming down the hallway.

It was Horace McGee, the sheriff, much the worse for wear. He had a scrape which started high on his forehead, across, and down his nose, and apparently took a chunk of skin off his chin. He stood there, hunching his left shoulder painfully.

"Come in, Horace," invited Fisher. The sheriff looked gloomily around at all of them.

"Some jug-headed critter jumped out

of a window and landed on me," he said painfully. "Spurred me all the way down." He rubbed a hand down his face and looked at the bloodsmear wearily.

"Must have landed with one foot on my left shoulder and almost unhinged me," he added.

"All right, Elmer," said Speedy, "what's your alibi?"

"Alibi?" queried Elmer sadly. "My goodness! I—I heard a noise in here, so I—I—well, I walked in—I guess. Something," Elmer felt of his head, "hit me, I suppose."

"Well, well!" snorted Fisher, his glasses askew. "This doesn't explain the condition of this room. Window smashed, furniture broken, everything upended. If you fellers want to carry on like this, why don't you rent a corral instead of a room in a decent hotel?"

"Throwin' people out through windows," added the sheriff.

"My mistake, I suppose," said Tombstone meekly. "Maybe I thought it was the door. And now," Tombstone changed his tone, "all of you get to hell out of here and let us sleep!"

"You ain't heard the last of this," warned the sheriff as Fisher gently herded him into the hallway. "You can't get away with things like this in Paradise City, I'll tell you that."

Speedy kicked the door shut in their faces. Tombstone said, "We've still got one of the ingredients left, Speedy."

"Oh, yeah—Elmer. How do you feel Elmer?"

"I—I believe," replied Elmer, "I shall, as you say, retire and lay away the remains for a while."

Elmer marched over to the door, took the upper part of his pajamas off the door-knob, opened the door and walked out. Tombstone and Speedy put the bedding back on the bed, locked the door, blew out the light and crawled back into bed.

"Is your mind clear on everything that happened?" asked Speedy.

"All except one thing, Speedy."

"Just one thing? What's that one thing?"

"What was the sheriff doin' down there under our window?"

"The street is down there—remember?" asked Speedy. "Straight down from our window is the sidewalk. Does that solve the mystery?"

"If I knew what the sheriff was doin' down there—yes."

- 3 -

THEY SLEPT late next morning, but they found Elmer Moot eating breakfast in the little restaurant. Elmer's left eye was closed and very purple. His nose was slightly swollen, too, and looked very sore. They sat down with him. Speedy said "You're lookin' well, Elmer."

"Out of one eye," admitted Elmer soberly, looking them over. "You two seem none the worse for wear."

"We're awful durable, Elmer," said Tombstone. "You take the whole Jones tribe, for instance—"

"Not me," interrupted Elmer. "I've taken about all I can. Even unto the eggs in this place. I ate one of them, but this one, staring up malignantly at me right now, proves that the egg came before the chicken. That egg couldn't have had a mother."

The sheriff and Baldy Blake came in, tossed their hats aside and came over to the next table. The sheriff was almost too stiff to walk, and his face was covered with assorted colors of courtplaster. He looked painfully at the three men, and Speedy said, "Good morning, Officers."

"Good for what?" asked the sheriff.

"We've been livin' here in peace and comfort, when along comes you two jugheads and upset everything. Man murdered; somebody jumps out of a second story window and lands on my head; and a man out at the Flyin' W is hauled in this mornin' with a broken leg."

"We didn't break anybody's leg, Sheriff," denied Tombstone.

"Horse done that," said Baldy. "Sam Miller fell off and broke his leg. Crawled to the ranch, they said. Brought him in this mornin' and turned him over to Doc Wright. Doc says he's in awful bad shape."

"Well, that's a right newsy item," said Speedy. "Who is Sam Miller, and who owns the Flyin' M?"

"Henry Weldon, the banker, owns the Flyin' M," said the sheriff. "Sam is the ramrod for the spread."

"Any clue to who perched on your shoulder last night?" asked Tombstone.

The harassed sheriff merely glared at Tombstone and turned to give his order to the waitress. Tombstone said to Elmer, "All this ought to give you somethin' for your book."

"Rather revolutionary, I'm afarid. I have been led to beheve that cowboys are romantic, and a Western sheriff is a tall, grim-faced man, who is afraid of nothing."

"This'n was," declared Speedy, "before that feller landed on his head and shortened him up a spell. I don't know how scared he is, of course."

"And," added Tombstone, "if a cowboy is romantic, he's sure doin' it on short money. Forty-a-month and board don't leave you much to romance about."

THEY PAID their checks and went back to the hotel, where Jim Fisher looked at them apprehensively. A man was fixing their window. Tombstone said, "Mr. Fisher, do you know this feller who got a busted leg?"

"Oh, yes, Sam Miller. Fine boy. Good man with cows. Been ramrod for Henry Melton for a long time. Bad looking leg. Got throwed off his horse couple miles from the ranch, and had to crawl. Horse came home, but the boys didn't know what happened. Might lose it."

"The horse," asked Speedy.

"No—his leg."

"This Henry Melton," said Tombstone, "he's the banker, huh?"

"That's right. Fine man, Henry is. Pillar of the church."

Elmer went upstairs with them and into their room. Tombstone said, "Maybe Elmer can figure it out, Speedy."

"Figure out what?" asked Elmer curiously.

"What happened," replied Tombstone, "when we ran into that feller in the buggy, he threw a valise into the canyon, before he busted up against the rocks."

"Prob'ly some old clothes," added Speedy.

"And," said Tombstone, "I've got a hunch that somebody—especially them two men who probably came back and killed him—were the ones who busted up this room last night, lookin' for that valise."

Elmer rubbed his sore eye and agreed that it was possible.

"Another thing," pointed out Tombstone. "A man dived out of the window and landed on the sheriff down on the sidewalk. Maybe he was Sam Miller. Maybe they carried him away, before anybody seen him. Maybe they had to wait until mornin' to bring him in to the doctor—or maybe they didn't know how bad he was hurt."

"Elmer, meet Mr. Maybe," said Speedy dryly.

"It could have happened like that," agreed Elmer," but what was in that valise, I wonder?"

"Elmer, I am going to find out," de-

clared Tombstone. "I am a man of very strong character."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Speedy, "and you're also as crazy as Thompson's mule, who swam the river to try and get a drink out of an alkali waterhole."

"It might be interesting to know what is in that valise," said Elmer. "It must be of extreme value."

"Look!" snorted Speedy. "The sheriff still suspects us, and—"

"Elmer," asked Tombstone, "can you ride a horse?"

"After a fashion," admitted Elmer. "I am not what you might call an expert equestrian."

"Prob'ly lop-sided from swallowin' dictionaries," sighed Speedy.

IT WAS about two hours later when Elmer—on a rented horse—and Tombstone pulled up in a brushy, rocky canyon. Far above them, out on the rim of the grade, the tiny figure of Speedy was waving his hat down to them, indicating the spot where Julius Silver had thrown his valise. They dismounted, while Speedy rode back down to the mouth of the canyon and came up to join them.

They searched carefully, but were unable to find any trace of the thrown valise. They were about to abandon the search, when Tombstone made the discovery. That valise was about fifty feet up there on the wall of the canyon, where it had hooked up in an gnarled old manzanita. To recover it was a problem.

Tombstone and Elmer argued over the best climbing route; so Speedy, who had no definite ideas, was left to watch the proceedings. Tombstone, taking a direct route, was in sight all the time, but Elmer was not visible. It was a difficult and dangerous try; Tombstone was flattened against the rock, trying to get hold of anything in reach, when a bullet smashed into the rock just at his left arm-pit. Another one threw rock-dust into his eyes, as he looked around, and his feet slipped.

Speedy, on his feet, wide-eyed, watched Tombstone bounce and slide down through the brush, where he finally somersaulted into a manzanita patch at the bottom. In his anxiety to find out how badly Tombstone was hurt, Speedy forgot about the shooting. He was on his knees, trying to get Tombstone's torn clothes unhooked from the manzanita, when a harsh voice rasped, "All right, you! Get up and keep your hands in sight."

Slowly he got to his feet. Two masked men were covering him with guns. One of them said, "Wise guys, huh? Thought you'd sneak back and get it, huh? Well, you'll get it all right—but not what's in that valise."

Swiftly they roped Speedy, dragged the limp Tombstone out of the brush and roped him, too. One of them said, "Not much use wastin' rope on this specimen, but we might as well make it unanimous."

Then they argued over recovery of the valise. One of them said, "No use bein' foolish about it. We might be seen from the grades. Best to wait until almost dark, and then get it. Don't want anybody to butt into this deal—not now."

They went further back and found a comfortable place to wait. Suddenly Speedy remembered Elmer, and wondered what became of him.

"Maybe he's smart," Speedy told himself. "Maybe he'll wait until he can get out safe, and then go for help."

After reflection, he said aloud, "No, he's too dumb for that."

Tombstone groaned quietly. Speedy leaned forward and said, "This is another of your beautiful ideas." Who are those two guys?" whispered Tombstone.

"You ain't dead?" gasped Speedy.

"The vote is close," whispered Tombstone, "but if I lose, you can demand a recount."

One of the two masked men came back to them. He said, "We're takin' you two away to a safe place—and we'll

get that valise after dark. Got to have ropes."

"I hope you hang yourselves," said Speedy.

The other man came in, leading their two horses. Nothing was said about Elmer Moot's horse, and Speedy wonderded if Elmer had made an escape to get help. Tombstone was apparently still unconscious, so they draped him across the saddle and roped him tightly. In spite of their predicament, Speedy had to grin to himself.

HORACE McGEE was in his office alone when Elmer came in. He looked curiously at Elmer, who was quite the worse for wear. Elmer said, "I took a ride with Jones and Smith this afternoon, Sheriff."

"I saw you leave town," nodded the sheriff. "What happened?"

"Jones and Smith saw Julius Silver throw a small valise into the canyon, just before his buggy smashed."

"They did, eh?" said the sheriff quietly. "They didn't tell me."

"We found it—about fifty feet up on the rocky wall of the canyon, hung up in some brush. Jones almost climbed to it, when a man shot twice at him. I don't believe he was hit, but he fell. I'm not exactly sure what happened—I was on the ledge quite a ways from the spot—but I do know that—well, as a matter of fact, I secured my horse and got out of the canyon, unseen by the two masked men."

"Two masked men?" queried the sheriff. "What did they do to Jones and Smith?"

"They roped Jones and Smith on their horses and took them away."

"Took them away? Did they get that valise?"

"They may have it by this time, sheriff."

"Well, what can we do?"

"I saw their two horses very plainly," explained Elmer. "I have seen them in town several times; they are from the Flying W!"

"Flying W!" said the sheriff in a husky whisper. "Why, them—wait! We'll get Henry Weldon to go out with us. We might be able to rescue Jones and Smith—and recover that valise, whatever is in it. We can be ready in a few minutes."

"Have you any idea what is in that valise, Sheriff?"

"Not the slightest, my boy. Must be valuable, though."

- 4 -

TOMBSTONE and Speedy had no idea where they were. It was a ranch-house, and the room they were in was evidently used as a storeroom. There was a boarded-up window, no furniture, no lights. Speedy could see a thin line of light under the door, indicating a lamp in the adjoining room. The two men had dumped them into the room without conversation, and had gone away. They heard their horses galloping.

"All precincts heard from, Tombstone?" asked Speedy.

"Don't make me talk," whispered Tombstone. "I think that all the skin is rubbed off my belly, and every joint in me feels loose."

"What do you think of your bright idea now?" asked Speedy. "Why can't we never mind our own business? We were sent here to wait for a man to contact us—not to get killed."

"You know somethin'?" whispered Tombstone huskily.

"I know a lot of things that won't help us none."

"This will." There was a chuckle in Tombstone's voice.

"Another bright idea, huh?" said Speedy.

"Very," whispered Tombstone. "They only used one long rope on me, and the blamed fools didn't realize I could pull a foot out of a boot."

After a lot of twisting and grunting Tombstone said, "Well, that's that."

"Are you loose?" asked Speedy quickly.

"I sure am. Let me get at your ropes now."

"Make it fast—I want to get out of here, Tombstone."

Tombstone quickly removed the ropes and tossed them aside.

"Only we ain't goin' no place," declared Tombstone. "No blamed person can take shots at me, make me ride forty miles on my belly, and not get retaliated. They went back to get that valise, didn't they?"

"That seems to be their main object."

"Good! We'll take it away from them."

"Look!" grunted Speedy miserably. "It ain't *our* valise. We don't care who shot the drummer. We was sent here to have a man contact us on some sort of a deal. He can't contact us out here. Let's find some rollin'-stock and get back to town."

"We better take a look at this place," suggested Tombstone. "I'd like to see what I look like in lamplight."

"You'll be disappointed," warned Speedy. "I got a good look at you after you hit bottom."

They went out into the main room, where an old lamp partly illuminated the rather large, rough interior. There were the usual tables and chairs, a long bench in front of a stone fireplace, some gaudy calendars decorating the rough walls. Their belts and guns were on the long bench. Speedy pounced on them.

"Nice place," observed Tombstone, as he buckled on his gun. His face was badly scratched, clothes torn, one ear still bleeding.

"All right—we've looked," said Speedy impatiently. "Let's find transportation and get out of here."

"I said we ain't goin'—remember?" replied Tombstone. "Nobody can treat me like that and not get—uh—what was that word?"

"Retaliated?"

"You said it, pardner. I'm growin' me a fat hatred of them two masqueraders."

"You're as stubborn as a jackass with an ulcerated tooth."

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned Tombstone. "Somebody comin'."

Speedy started for the store-room, but Tombstone grabbed him by the arm. "In here!" he hissed. "It's closer."

HE OPENED a door, on which was no lock—only a pull—and it proved to be nothing more than a sort of closet, hanging full of ropes and miscellaneous harness. They hunched in there and closed the door, just as the front door opened. The sheriff's voice said quietly, "Nobody home, Henry."

"Doesn't seem to be," replied Henry Melton, the banker.

Tombstone peeked through a crack in the door. Melton was a big, gray-haired man, with a deeply-lined face. Just behind him was Horace McGee, the sheriff, and back by the door was Elmer Moot. Tombstone started to whisper, but Speedy whispered, "I've got a crack, too."

"They left a lamp burnin'," observed the sheriff. "They'll be back—and what a surprise they'll have, Henry."

"I—I don't like it," stated the banker. "I don't like any of this deal, Horace."

"Who does?" queried Elmer, moving ahead.

Henry Melton turned suddenly, and shoved the muzzle of a forty-five into the middle of the amazed Elmer Moot, who tried to back away, and ended up against the wall, both hands in the air.

"Get some rope, Horace," ordered Melton. "Must be plenty around here. Maybe in that back room."

The sheriff found the ropes that Tombstone and Speedy had discarded, and quickly tied Elmer Moot, hand and foot.

"What'll we do with him?" asked the sheriff.

"Sit him on the bench. We'll get in that back room, and when those two snakes show up, we'll take them, too."

"Good idea, Henry," applauded the sheriff. "Won't they be surprised? Imagine them biting the hand that feeds 'em."

"I suppose Sam Miller was in with them on this, but got out of the deal with a broken leg. They were the ones who tried to jump Jones and Smith in the hotel. They thought that Jones and Smith had that valise. Those two poor fools couldn't get rid of that stuff, even if they got away with this deal."

"And we're stuck, too," said the sheriff sadly. "Without Silver, we can't do a thing, Henry. Well, we've made enough. Might be a good idea to slow up for a while. Next thing we know we'd have a Federal investigator down here on our necks."

"Don't be silly," said Melton. "Who would suspect the banker and the sheriff?"

They both laughed, but the sheriff sobered quickly. "What in the devil did they do with Jones and Smith?"

"Probably left them out in the brush. Don't worry about them."

"No, I guess not. Better get back in that room and wait."

"I love this," whispered Tombstone. "It's like watchin' a play."

The store-room door closed, and Speedy said, "You're just naturally nosey, that's all, Mr. Jones. Personally, I'd be happy back in that hotel room."

Elmer was sitting on the bench, trying to get loose from his ropes, but to no avail. Tombstone nudged Speedy.

"Elmer is havin' quite a time out there," he whispered. "He's gettin' a lot of stuff for his book."

Suddenly Elmer quit tugging, turned his head and looked toward the kitchen doorway, blocked from the view of the two men in the closet. Then they heard the soft scrape of a sole on wood. Elmer was still tensed, looking intently. Then they heard a husky whisper. "What in hell is goin' on in here?"

Another voice, higher pitched, said, "I don't like this, Al. What's he doin' here, all tied up?"

The scraping of steps came closer; Tombstone and Speedy could see two masked men, both with guns ready. One of them had the small valise, which he carefully reached out and placed on the table beside the lamp.

"Who brought you here?" he asked Elmer.

"I'm not telling on anyone," replied Elmer bravely.

"Not tellin', huh? You better, feller. We're awful good at persuadin'."

"You got the valise down!" exclaimed Elmer. "Wonderful."

"Watch that crazy fool!" ordered one of them. "I'm goin' to see if them two half-wits have been tampered with."

He went slowly over to the store-room, where he cautiously opened the door and looked inside.

"So blasted dark in here!" he complained, and moved inside.

THERE WAS the sound of a dull thud, the scrape of a boot-sole, and then complete silence. From outside came the notes of a mockingbird, tuning up for the evening. Elmer laughed quietly, and the man whirled on him quickly. "What's funny about it?" he demanded harshly.

Elmer didn't say—but he had his own ideas of humor. The man twisted quickly, calling sharply toward the doorway, "Ed! Ed, are you all right?"

But there was no response. Tombstone and Speedy couldn't see the doorway of the store-room, but they saw the masked man suddenly lift his gun. Another gun blasted sharply, and the masked man rocked ba[illegible] his heels.

twisted a little and went sprawling.

Then the sheriff and Henry Melton came in view, watching the fallen man. Melton saw the valise on the table, and moved over to it quickly. The sheriff touched the masked man with his toe, shoved a little, and looked at Melton.

"Henry," he said huskily, "we're in a bad position—now. How can we explain all this?"

"It looks bad, doesn't it, Horace?" he asked calmly. "In fact, as things shape up right now, we would have difficulty. But I have worked out the only possible solution."

Melton turned his head and looked around the room. He didn't seem too concerned. Finally he smiled slowly, as he faced the sheriff. "I'd hate to burn this house," he said, "but they say that fire covers a lot of sins. You see, Horace, no one knows I came here with you tonight; no one would ever suspect Henry Melton of doing wrong. That valise is worth a lot of money, Horace; a lot of money that I can use."

"But, Henry," protested the sheriff, "part of it belonged to Julius Silver and part of it to me. I don't see where you—"

Both Tombstone and Speedy jerked back, as Melton's gun blasted only about a foot from the sheriff. There was no chance for a miss at that distance. They heard the sheriff crash down, and took another look.

Melton was standing there, looking down at the sheriff, the gun gripped in his right hand. "Sorry, Horace," he said, "but I don't need you any longer."

He turned his head, looking at Elmer, his back to the closet door. "You were a fool to mix into this deal," he told Elmer. "We don't like snoopers down here. But it is all right; you'll merely add fuel to the fire."

Melton picked up the valise, looked again at Elmer and placed the valise back on the table.

"It might be better if I play safe," he said. "Anything might happen—and dead men don't talk."

As Melton lifted his gun, Tombstone swung the door open and in a diving tackle he caught Melton around the waist. The gun went off, but the bullet smashed into the ceiling, as Tombstone's rush fairly swept the banker off his feet, carried him across the room, where they crashed solidly into the opposite wall.

SLOWLY Tombstone got to his feet, rubbing a numb elbow.

"Take the ropes off Elmer and put 'em on the banker," he said painfully. "Our leadin' citizens might be playin' possum, Speedy."

Speedy quickly removed the ropes from Elmer, who merely sat there, apparently still in a daze over his deliverance. They quickly roped Melton. Elmer managed to say, "I have never been as glad to see anyone in my life."

"Well, howdy to you, too, Elmer," said Tombstone soberly.

Speedy picked up the valise and opened it, staring into it.

"Dump it on the table," suggested Tombstone.

Speedy did just that. There was a lot of dry grass and several hunks of rock, which rattled on the table-top. Tombstone and Speedy stood there, looking dumbly at the contents. Tombstone picked up one of the rocks and looked at it critically.

"Thirty thousand dollars?" he whispered. "I know where there's billions of dollars worth of *that* stuff."

"Looks like plain rocks to me," said Speedy quietly.

"They are," remarked Elmer calmly. "You see, after they took you two out of the canyon, I climbed up there, took the stuff out, and put that stuff in."

"Why?" asked Tombstone blankly.

"For security reasons," smiled Elmer. "You see, I had no idea how this might turn out; so I decided to take the stuff."

"Well, what on earth was in it—diamonds?" asked Speedy.

"Narcotics," replied Elmer. "Heroin, opium, marajuana."

"Dope, huh?" grunted Tombstone. "But—but how'd you know all this, Elmer?"

"You see," explained Elmer, "I was sent here to try and run down the source of so much narcotics coming out of Mexico and into this valley. After a few days here, I realized the difficulty, and contacted the Chief for help. Later I was notified that someone—typical of this country—was coming to assist me." Elmer shrugged, "That was all very fine, but he never showed up."

"You jist can't depend on anybody these days," declared Tombstone. "That same darn thing happened to me and Speedy. Well," Tombstone looked around critically, "I reckon we'll have to go to town for help. But I'll tell you this much—me and Speedy have got to quit foolin' and stay in town."

"Why?" asked Elmer curiously.

"So a man can contract us."

"The word is contact," interposed Speedy.

Elmer looked them over thoughtfully. It was ridiculous, of course, but he just had to ask, "Who are you two, anyway?"

"Jones and Smith," replied Tombstone. "You know that, Elmer."

"I know your names, of course—but what are you two doing down here?"

Tombstone looked Elmer over, much as a scientist might look at a rare specimen. "Well, good gosh, Elmer! After what we've done—what we've gone through, almost in sight and sound of you—and you ask that? Speedy said you was dumb enough to join our lodge, but after that remark, I think you're also blind and deef."

"I accept the rebuke," said Elmer quietly. "In fact, I deserve it."

★

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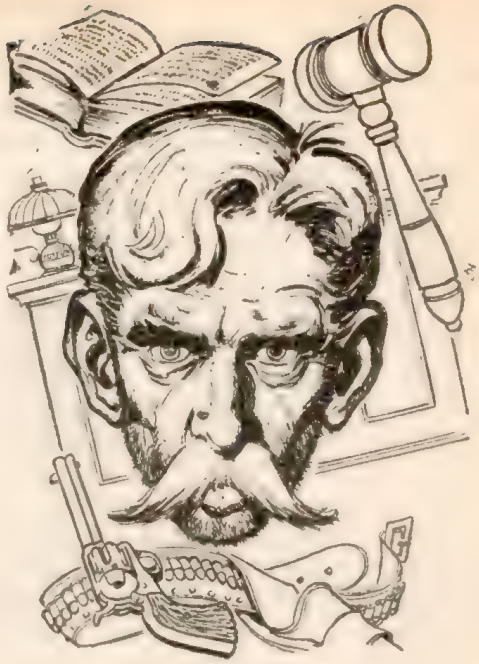

KILL OR BE KILLED

Judge Steele Story

by LON WILLIAMS

WARDLOW STEELE, judge of Flat Creek's dreaded criminal court, leaned on his elbows and scowled at a room filled with that gold-rush community's mongrel, tough breed. Among them were citizens who believed in orderly justice as a substitute for vigilante's swift and terrifying judgments.

Vigies were here, too, determined that orderly justice should function; at any rate, that justice should prevail. As for Judge Steele himself, he had found Vigie methods more to his liking. In this court of law—cluttered by lawyers and their endless rules of procedure and evidence—he regarded himself as a gross misfit. In his opinion, too, hanging of murderers was such uphill business as to make law itself look like a transgressor against criminals.

Yet, be-consarned, if this brand of justice was what people wanted, he'd give it to 'em, by thunder. He gave his straw-colored mustache a couple of tugs and nodded to his right. "Sheriff call court."

Sheriff Jerd Buckalew rose, tall and rugged. "Court's now in session; it'll do your health good if you take my word for it."

Plenty of armed deputies stood ready to back up his warning.

Steele nodded again. "Skiffy, call fust case."

Clerk James Skiffington rose, tall and thin, and adjusted his iron-rimmed spectacles. "People *versus* Pug Wallet, otherwise known as Flat-nose, Horsemouth and Dog Wallet. Charge, first-degree murder."

Steele glared down at a puncheon dedicated to lost souls faced with their final jump-off. There sat about as mean looking gorilla as he'd ever seen; he was curly-haired, flat-nosed, wide-lipped, bull-necked—with a pious expression as incongruous as a wagging tail on a sheep-killing dog.

"Murder, eh? Why didn't you just hang yourself fust off? Doing it this way puts people to a heap of unnecessary trouble. You got a lawyer?"

A slim, thin-faced gentleman, im-

maculately dressed in black suit, white vest and four-in-hand necktie got up. His face was clean-shaved, his thick black hair meticulously parted and brushed. He lifted his eyebrows at Steele. "I am his lawyer, your honor. French Demeree."

Steele sniffed in distaste. Here was a very special reason why justice was hard to come by. "Yeah," he snarled. "Demeree from Tennessee. Demeree. in what jungle did you capture this ape?"

Demeree's expression was untroubled. "If your honor please, this gentleman is jungle-bred only in one particular, which shall be stated in due time. Otherwise he has walked most uprightly, has fallen upon this evil day through no fault of his own."

Steele snorted in scorn. "Demeree, maybe with your fancy words you can talk wings onto that critter. If you do, he still won't be no hummingbird." He swung left. "Whar's our man?"

A stocky redhead with excellent face and noble bearing got up. "Wade Claybrook, your honor. Prosecuting attorney."

STEELE contemplated his prosecutor with hopes that experience had too often proved forlorn. Claybrook was scholarly, dignified and honorable; in Steele's opinion, those qualities were excellent—but insufficient. What Flat Creek needed for its prosecuting attorney, according to his figuring, was a man-eating tiger.

But Steele offered encouragement. "Wade, would pulling handfuls of feathers from a buzzard appeal to your sense of duty right now?"

Claybrook did not smile. "If your honor please, my sense of duty is directed against birds of prey, not against scavengers. Even so, my zeal as a huntsman is tempered by fairness; I would regard it as no victory, if an innocent man suffered from any valor which I might possess."

"Humph!" Steele grunted in disgust. "That's about what I expected." He glared down at Pug Wallet. "All right. you unsavory monkey, what's your plea?"

Demeree had remained standing. "If your honor please, defendant pleads not guilty. by reason of self-defense."

"So that's whar your client is jungle-bred, eh?" scoffed Steele.

"It is, your honor," said Demeree. "This right of self-defense is as old as man; it extends beyond man to all forms of life. It is so completely and universally recognized, as to rate as a fundamental law of nature."

That was a hard knock, yet one that should have been foreseen. Steele hit back nevertheless. "Demeree, before this trial's over. you may hear of other fundamentals. What are you going to do when one runs head-on into another?"

"If I may say so, your honor," Demeree replied suavely, "fundamentals are never in conflict. Each supplements or is supplemented by another, so that all taken together constitute one harmonious whole. It is fundamental that a man may preserve his life against one who would wrongfully deprive him of it; to further preserve that life, it is fundamental that he may eat, breathe and enjoy a free and unimperiled existence."

Steele turned hopefully to Claybrook. "Wade, what have you got to say?"

"I suggest, your honor, that a jury be empaneled," Claybrook replied with dignity.

Steele's expectation ended in sudden anger. "Claybrook, I don't know how this court would ever get along without you. Jurors come and be sworn."

Twelve nondescript citizens, as their names were called, scrouged forward. They lifted their right hands, swore truth to find and a true verdict to render, and sat down.

"Witnesses next," Steele snapped.

Another group of rough and uncouth

characters scrouged forward; they were promptly sworn and herded to a back room.

Steele tossed Claybrook a hard look. "All right, Mr. Prosecutor, start your meat grinder."

Claybrook put his shoulders back and addressed a deputy-sheriff. "Call Square Tolley."

A shriveled potato of about thirty-five years was brought in and seated. His iron-gray hair was plastered tight; he had thin lips, a sharp nose and big ears. His dark eyes sparkled with intelligence; his expression was that of a happy man. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Yes, sir, what?" said Claybrook.

"Nothing at all, sir. I just said yes-sir."

IN STEELE'S opinion, Wade Claybrook could beat anybody that ever lived at antagonizing his own witnesses. Though impatience was stirring, he withheld comment.

Claybrook said, "What is your name?"

"Tolley is my name. Square Tolley."

"Sometimes called Equal Dimensions?"

"Yes, sir; that, among other things."

"What other things?"

Demeree eased up. "If your honor please, this man's qualifications do not depend upon diversity of nomenclature. His name is 'Square' which, considering his physiognomy, is an obvious misnomer. Yet if he knows anything—which I doubt—he can tell it, though he's called Cubical, Spherical, or Square-on-the-hypotenuse."

Steele's face tightened. Consarn this Demeree! But Claybrook was about as impossible. "Wade, ask your witness what he knows about this murder."

Claybrook flushed, but controlled his anger. "Mr. Tolley, do you know defendant Pug Wallet?"

"Yes, sir, I know him when I see him. Can't say I've seen him a heap, though; he ain't a man I like to look at."

"I object," Demeree protested warmly. "This problem in geometry was not asked to disclose his secret aversions."

Claybrook eyed his witness coolly. "Just answer my questions, sir: Where were you last Saturday night between eight and nine o'clock?"

"I was at Cooksy Blair's saloon, where a good many other men were likewise to be found—some drunk, some sober, some betwixt and between."

"To which class did you belong?"

"You can say I was among them as had just recently wet their whistles."

"Did you know Little Willie Chumby?"

"Oh, sure; knowed him well. Mostly he was called Willie Wart. He was a banty rooster from Arkansas. Owned a gold-mining claim in Old Humbug Gulch; right good claim, too. Men as passed it up, now wish they hadn't. Little Willie was offered—"

"Just a minute!" Claybrook cut in sharply. "Will you answer my questions and leave off your excursions into history?"

Square Tolley smiled cheerfully. "Yes, sir, be most obliged to."

"Between eight and nine last Saturday night, was Little Willie at Cooksy Blair's saloon?"

"Ah, now you're getting warm," declared Tolley; "he sure was there, and so was Pug Wallet. You should've seen 'em; what a show they put on! Why, before—"

"Sir!" Claybrook scolded angrily. "Again I say, will you just answer my questions."

"He said he would," Demeree prompted, easing up. "If your honor will permit my saying so, this Euclidean theorem is doing right well. If Mr. Claybrook will remain silent, it won't be long before Euclid can say, *Quod est demonstrandum,* or, in tran-

slation, *that which was to be proved.* Anyhow, why pull back on a winning horse?"

"If your honor please," said Claybrook indignantly, "Mr. Demeree will render this court a better service by keeping quiet. I know how to question a witness."

Steele picked up his gavel. "Be-consarned if you lawyers can't kill more time than a couple of tobacco-chewing loafers. Claybrook, get on with your questions."

CLAYBROOK glared through his eyebrows at Tolley. "Did you see Wallet kill Little Willie Chumby?"

"Now you're getting hot," replied Tolley. "That's exactly what I saw; Wallet shot him dead, he did. Just whipped out his gun and shot him right down dead."

"Under what circumstances?"

"You mean how it all started?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, it started like a firecracker."

"Yes?"

"Yes, sir. First thing anybody knowed, Willie Wart took a running-jump and rammed his head into Pug's stomach."

"Where did this happen?"

"At Cooksy's. They was both standing at Cooksy's bar, having drinks; that's where it started. All of a sudden, Little Willie puts down his empty glass and turns himself into a billygoat, so to speak. When his head hits Pug's stomach, it looks like it goes clean through to Pug's backbone. Hurts, too; Pug lets out a scream and flips a backward summersault. While he's down Little Willie jumps into his middle with both feet, kicks his chin and bangs his fists into Pug's face. Pug rolls, gets up and tries to get away. He can't, though; everybody's gathered round, and trying to get out is like trying to run through a rock wall. Meanwhile, Willie comes at him from behind; trips him up; lands on him with his feet again; and beats his face with his fists. Pug rolls from under, manages to grab a chair, which he smashes to pieces, but misses Little Willie.

"After that, Willie uses his billygoat head-ram again. Pug grunts and turns another backward summersault. This time he gets up and runs. There's a stairway going up from Cooksy's barroom; Pug takes to that, but Little Willie chases—gets ahead of him, turns and drives both feet into Pug's stomach. Pug folds into a ball and rolls like a pumpkin down them stairs. Willie's right after him, too.

"But this time Willie don't jump into Pug's middle with his feet. He grabs a post from that busted chair. 'Now,' says Willie, 'this is where I beat your brains out.' Pug is down, flat on his back, with a cut lip, bloody nose, bruised chin, and blue spots on his face. One eye is about swelled shut, and her comes Willie Wart with that club drawed back to slam his brains out. That's when Pug whips out his gun and shoots Little Willie—yes, sir, shoots him dead."

Demeree rose quietly. "If your honor please, defendant at this time moves for a directed verdict of not guilty. One could hardly imagine a clearer case of self-defense than is shown here."

"Demeree," replied Steel, "you seem mighty anxious to call off this dog fight; what's your hurry?"

"I'm a busy man, your honor," said Demeree with a lift of his eyebrows.

"By thunder, Demeree, you're excused to go about your business any time you choose; but thar's plenty yet to be said about that flat-nosed baboon settin' thar by you. What does self-defense mean anyhow?"

"It means, your honor, that a man has a right to defend himself against another who seeks to take his life. If in defending himself he kills his assailant, that killing is justified."

CLAYBROOK intervened impatiently. "Now, your honor, Mr. Demeree—as usual—is seeking to clinch his case while matters look most favorable to his client. Moreover, with customary artistry of misstatement he has misinformed your honor as to what constitutes self-defense."

"I object," stormed Demeree. "According to his habit—when Mr. Claybrook has no case—he becomes abusive, impugns motives, and questions his opponent's honesty. Here was a man flat on his back, virtually helpless; and approaching was an assailant armed with a deadly weapon and an avowed purpose to beat out his brains. If killing in self-defense was not justified in that situation, it could never be justified."

Claybrook responded stubbornly. "One who kills another must have apprehended imminent death, or great bodily harm from that other, and—"

"That situation existed here," said Demeree.

"Please let me finish," Claybrook retorted angrily.

"You are finished," Demeree said with a sarcastic smile, "certainly your case against defendant is finished."

"Consarn you, Demeree," said Steele, "you keep out of this until it's your turn to speak. Go ahead, Claybrook: What is self-defense?"

"If your honor please," said Claybrook, "I'm not through questioning this witness."

"Then question him, by thunder. If you can't answer my question, then do something else by all means; if we didn't have to be bothered with consarned lawyers, this court might get somewhars."

Claybrook lowered his head and stared through his eyebrows. "Mr. Tolley, how big was Willie Chumby?"

"How big?"

"That's what I asked you."

"Well, sir, it depends on whether he was drunk or sober."

"Don't talk nonsense; I asked you a simple question."

"Did you ask me how big was Willie Wart?"

"You heard me."

Demeree got up. "If your honor please, what was Mr. Claybrook's question?"

Steele's nostrils dilated dangerously. "Demeree, set down."

Demeree eased down.

Square Tolly blinked at Claybrook. "I believe you asked how big was Little Willie?"

"I did, sir," snapped Claybrook.

"Well, I'll tell you how it was, Mr. Claybrook," said Tolley. "When Willie Wart was cold sober, he weighed ninety-nine pounds; when he'd had one glass of whiskey, he was as big as a horse. Howling-dog drunk, he was as big as all outdoors."

"Explain what you mean," Claybrook demanded curtly.

Tolley's lips made a quarter-moon, points upward. "Well, sir, Little Willie had plenty of strut, drunk or sober. But when he was sober, he never bothered nobody; never had a fight, so far as I know. But half-lit by liquor, he would've took on a room full of wildcats; whiskey made him forget he was such a runt, made him act big and talk big."

"Was he half-lit when he rammed his head into Pug Wallet?"

"Object," shouted Demeree; "that's calling for a conclusion."

"Mr. Demeree is right," said Claybrook.

"Wade, don't ever admit that Demeree is right," fumed Steele; "stick to your ground. Be-consarned if you don't bluff too easy."

Claybrook replied indignantly, "If your honor please, I think I know what I'm doing."

"Fine!" exclaimed Steele. "For a minute thar, I wasn't sure."

CLAYBROOK'S jaw muscles knotted; however, he saved his wrath.

"Mr. Tolley, who was first up for a drink—Little Willie or Pug Wallet?"

"Now, I'm glad you asked me that," said Tolley. "It was Little Willie; he'd had one glass of whiskey before Pug showed up. Then, when Pug stepped up and said to One-hair Tobin, 'Whiskey, and I mean whiskey,' Little Willie turned for a look. It was like touching off a steel trap: Little Willie whirled, screamed, lowered his head and shot forward like something heaved off a mountain."

"And Pug turned a backward summersault?"

"Indeed, he did."

"How big is Pug Wallet?"

"How big?"

"Yes, how big?"

"Well, there he is; why don't you look?"

"I'm asking you."

Tolley looked at Wallet, met a stare full of menace. "I don't know how big he is. Looks purty good size to me."

"How tall would you say he is?"

Tolley looked again. Pug's expression was saying, *I'll kill you for this.* Tolley swallowed and looked at Claybrook. "I don't know how tall he is; I'd guess him to be about ten feet."

"Why do you guess that?"

Demeree got up promptly, "If your honor please—as I mentioned heretofore—when Mr. Claybrook sees himself losing his case, he becomes abusive. Right now he's about to abuse his own witness. Tolley's been a good witness, too; I should've had him on my side."

Steele glanced sourly at Claybrook. "Wade, proceed."

Claybrook glared at Tolley. "I asked you a question."

"I've forgot what it was."

"Why did you guess that Pug Wallet is ten feet tall?"

"Because you asked me."

"I didn't ask you to guess ten feet."

"But you asked me to guess."

"All right, all right," said Claybrook; "how much does Wallet weigh?"

"I don't know."

"Then guess."

Tolley looked at Wallet, who stared back carnivorously. Tolley swallowed and looked back at Claybrook. "I guess he'd weigh a right smart."

"About how much?"

"I'd guess about four hundred pounds. Maybe more."

Claybrook sat down. "That's all, your honor."

Steele glanced at Demeree. "Want to cross-examine?"

Demeree got up. "No, your honor; I believe defendant is willing to admit that Mr. Tolley has spoken truthfully in every detail—except as to height and weight. Mr. Tolley obviously is not an expert in weight and measures. That point seems quite unimportant, however."

your next witness."

Claybrook rose. "Your honor, I have

Steele turned to Claybrook. "Call no more witnesses."

Steele leaned forward. "What in tarnation do you mean by that? Square Tolley said that saloon was full of men."

"Yes, your honor," Claybrook returned casually. "It just happens that Mr. Demeree had them all subpoenaed as defense witnesses. How he happened to overlook Square Tolley is something of a mystery; he got everybody else."

DEMEREE was up. "Defense counsel considered it sagacious to leave one small morsel for Mr. Claybrook."

"Mr. Demeree's sagacity is excelled only by his perspicacity," said Claybrook with angry sarcasm. "If he can now explain why a man ten feet tall and weighing four hundred pounds had to shoot a runt of ninety-nine pounds in order to keep from being killed, he will go down in history as a genius."

"Mr. Tolley has explained that fully and completely," retorted Demeree; "accordingly, I shall not find it necessary to call any witnesses."

"Yes, you will, by thunder, or I'll call 'em for you," roared Steele.

"But, your honor, defendant is not required to offer proof; that was, and is, Mr. Claybrook's burden."

"Consarn you, Demeree, you can't corner every witness in town and shut off testimony like that. Call your fust witness."

Demeree nodded at his client. Pug Wallet rose, came up and sat as a witness for himself.

Clerk Skiffington rose. "Stand up and be sworn."

Wallet stared. "Huh?"

"Stand up," rasped Skiffington.

"You heard him," said Steele savagely.

Wallet stood.

"Hold up your hand," said Skiffington.

Wallet obeyed.

"Swear - tell - truth - whole - truth - num - but - truth?"

"Sure," said Wallet.

"So help you, you'd better do it, too," Skiffington added and sat down.

Wallet eased down.

Demeree arched his eyebrows. "Mr. Wallet, you have just heard Mr. Tolley's testimony, have you not?"

"Yes, sir, and he told it exactly like it was, word for word."

"How tall are you, Mr. Wallet?"

"I'm fourteen hands high."

"How many feet would that be?"

"I don't know; I was never measured in feet—only with horse measure."

"How much do you weigh?"

"I reckon about a hundred and thirty."

"That's all," said Demeree.

Steele glanced at Claybrook. "Cross-examine him, Wade."

"No questions," responded Claybrook.

"What do you mean, no questions?"

"I mean I do not intend to cross-examine."

"You mean to say you'll let this hyena get away with perjury?"

Claybrook squared his shoulders valiantly. "If your honor please, it is apparent to everyone present that Pug Wallet is over six feet tall, weighs at least two hundred pounds, and has as much muscle as a bull buffalo."

"All right, Wade." Steele glared at Demeree: "Call your next liar."

Demeree waited until Wallet had returned to his seat, then addressed a deputy. "Call Goof Wadkin."

Wadkin was a lean, impudent whiskey-head of about forty. His hair was sparse and gray, his face lined with red streaks.

"Your name?" asked Demeree.

"Wadkin," replied Goof.

"Mr. Wadkin, were you at Cooksy Blair's saloon last Saturday night when defendant had an encounter with one Will Chumby?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Demeree. I sure was. I was standing at Cooksy's bar right beside Chumby; saw everything that happened."

"What *did* happen?"

STEELE listened with angry attention while Wadkin related a story substantially identical with that related by Square Tolley.

"Your witness," Demeree said to Claybrook.

"No questions," said Claybrook.

"No, hold on thar," Steele roared with fury, "Claybrook, if you've got no questions, I've got some."

"If your honor please," said Demeree, "this is highly improper. Flat Creek citizens elected a prosecuting attorney; they also elected a judge. These two offices are not interchangeable—each has its own duties. Defendant objects to your taking sides in this trial."

"And well he might by thunder." Steele returned furiously; "you set down thar, Demeree."

"But, sir—"

Demeree saw deputies headed his way; he sat down.

Claybrook got up. "If your honor please, Mr. Demeree is entirely correct. A defendant is entitled to a fair and impartial trial; it is not proper—"

"Set down, Claybrook."

Claybrook crimped his lips and sat down.

Steele turned his eyes savagely upon Goof Wadkin. "Now, see hyar; we've got more hangropes than one, and we're ready to use as many as necessary. One false statement out of you, and I'll call up a bunch of Vigies. This is a law court, but nobody's going to make a monkey of it. Can you hear good?"

Goof looked scared. "Yes, sir, Judge. I can hear as good as anybody."

"All right, answer my questions. So you was standing beside Little Willie. was you?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long had you been standing thar?"

Goof swallowed and looked more scared. "About five minutes."

"Had you been talking to Little Willie?"

"No, sir; not a word."

Steele's eyes grew hard and fixed.

Goof looked at Steele. He paled and gulped. "Well, Judge, maybe I did say a word or two."

"Just what did you say?"

Goof cast about for some means of escape. He saw none. He twisted, squirmed, looked panicky. "Judge, have I got to tell that?"

"You've got a choice," replied Steele. "When you're asked questions in this court, either you answer 'em or you hang; take your choice."

"Well, now, Judge, this ain't what I was supposed to do."

"You're wasting mighty precious time, Wadkin."

"I told Little Willie what Pug said about him."

"What did Pug say?"

"Pug said, 'You tell that little wart on a dog that I said he's a skunk. You tell him I said he's a thief. You tell him I said he's an egg-sucking hound and too stupid to know a rotten egg from a good one.' And that's what I told him."

"Why did Pug want you to tell him that?"

GOOF LOOKED about uneasily. He avoided Wallet's eyes as something poison. "Judge, it all goes back a spell. Pug and Little Willie owned adjoining claims; they had a boundary dispute, and a committee stepped in to settle it. This committee reported that Pug was trying to steal part of Little Willie's claim. Pug had to get off, but he said he'd settle with Little Willie, if both lived long enough."

"Keep talking," said Steele.

Goof thought it over, decided he'd gone too far to retreat. "All right, Judge, I reckon I might as well; it was a follow-up of that boundary dispute. Last Saturday night, Pug says to me, says he, 'Look here, Goof, I want you to do me a favor.' 'All right, Pug,' I says, 'what is it?' Pugs says, 'I've got it all figured out."

Wallet surged up. "That's a lie. I never said nothin' to that old sot; anything he done was his own dirty scheme."

Steele lowered his eyes to Wallet. "Do you want to set down, or do you want somebody to set you down?"

Demeree pulled Wallet's sleeve. "Sit down, Pug."

Wallet eased down.

Steele returned his attention to Goof Wadkin. "Pug told you he had it all figured out, eh? Now go on from there."

Wadkin twisted but responded. "I says to Pug, 'What have you got figured out?' And Pug says, 'I want you to go into Cooksy's and stand beside Willie Wart. After he's about half-stewed, I want you to tell him something.' Pug told me what he wanted me to tell Little Willie, and that's what I told him, just like I said before."

"Did he tell you why he wanted you to tell that to Little Willie?"

Demeree got up. "If your honor please, it is plain what this is leading up to. It is my duty as an attorney to advise this witness that he cannot be required to make statements that will incriminate himself. His right against self-incrimination is guaranteed by our

constitution. It is one of our oldest rights, brought to America by our forefathers and jealously guarded by them at every turn. *Nemo tenetur seipsum accusare.* Which means that no man shall be required to give evidence against himself."

Steele relaxed momentarily. "All right, Claybrook, we've run into a constitutional squall; lend a hand."

Caybrook got up reluctantly and with difficulty put aside his peevishness. "Your honor, that privilege Mr. Demeree spoke of is a strictly personal one. Goof Wadkin can claim it if he wants to; Mr. Demeree cannot claim it for him."

"I did not undertake to claim it for him," retorted Demeree; "I merely sought to advise him of his rights."

"All right," said Steele. "You gentlemen be seated." He turned to Wadkin. "My question was, did Horsemouth Wallet tell you *why* he wanted you to carry those insults to Little Willie?"

Goof had discovered a source of courage. "Now, look here, Judge, I got my constitutional rights, you know."

Steele nodded. "They're fully recognized."

"Well, now, it's like this, Judge; I don't want to tell nothin' that'll get me into no trouble."

"You don't have to."

"All right, then. I won't answer."

Steele's nostrils spread; his eyebrows lifted. "You won't?"

Goof shook his head. "No, Judge, I sure won't if I don't have to."

"What is it you won't answer?"

"I won't answer nothin' that'll make me out no criminal."

"Do you mean to say you was mixed up in this murder."

"No, sir, Judge; no, sir."

"Then why don't you answer my question?"

"It's my constitutional right."

STEELE tugged at his mustache. "All right, Goof, I'll have to turn you over to Mr. Claybrook. I can wade whar water's only belly-deep; anything deeper strangles me. Claybrook, you're a scholar. Take over."

Claybrook got up and glared at Goof. "Are you trying to protect yourself, or Pug Wallet?"

"I don't have to answer; it might get me into trouble."

"You're already in trouble," declared Claybrook. "If you clam up here, at next grand jury meeting you'll be indicted as an accessary to murder. Pug Wallet wanted you to be a talebearer beause he wanted Little Willie to start a fight, didn't he?"

"Yes," said Goof nervously; "that's exactly what Pug wanted."

"He told you so, didn't he?'

"Yes."

Demeree shouted his protest. "I object. This witness is being intimidated."

"Demeree," said Steele, "you're exactly right. For all practical purposes, this witness is a-straddle of a horse with a rope around his neck; and he got it thar by being a skunk and a low-down liar. Now, you set down and quit worrying about him."

Demeree sat down in angry frustration.

Claybrook pursued his triumphant course. "Goof, you knew, didn't you, if Little Willie jumped on Pug Wallet, that Wallet meant to kill him?"

"Yes, sir; that's exactly what Pug said he meant to do."

"And all that turning summersaults and rolling down stairs was to make it look good, wasn't it?"

"That's exactly what Pug said he aimed to do. He aimed to fall down, if Willie Wart hit him; he meant to beg for help. He meant to bust up a chair so Willie could get his hands on a club and come at him when he was down. That's when Pug meant to shoot him."

"He told you all that, did he?"

"That's exactly what he told me. He also told me that all I had to do was to put them insults in Willie's ear."

Claybrook nodded and studied briefly. Then he wrinkled his forehead. "Goof, have you got anything that ties you hand and foot to Flat Creek?"

Goof looked surprised. "Why, no, sir, not a thing."

"Do you think that by tomorrow you could be a right far piece from Flat Creek?"

"Huh? You mean—"

"You're not under indictment yet," said Claybrook; "nobody's going to arrest you until there's an indictment."

"You mean I can go now."

Claybrook glanced up for a sign.

Steele nodded approval, never before had he been so proud of his man Claybrook.

"You can go," Claybrook said to Goof.

Goof sought his way out. Faces of spectators had grins on them, but Goof looked neither to right nor to left. Nor did he look back when open air had received him.

Steele arched his brows at Demeree. "Any more witnesses?"

"No, your honor, not if I can help it. I'm sorry I had to call that one."

Steele nodded at his jurors

They filed out. Two minutes later they were back. A solemn-faced gold-digger remained standing. "Guilty, Judge. First-degree murder."

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Tops in Mystery Fiction

and the current issue features

REMAINS TO BE SEEN
by Wadsworth Nealey

THE PARROT IN COW'S LANE
by Edward A. Dieckmann

HIDING PLACE
by Basil Wells

These, and others, are in the May issue of

SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

THE TRADING POST

Department of Fictional Folklore

BEAR BUSCOE PALAVERS

by Harold Gluck

SOMETIMES I get so riled mad that I could take my sixshooter and do a bit of noise-making. Good way to let my steam boil off me, when I think how blasted ignorant you city folks can be! You talk about Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and Kit Carson as if they made up the whole West. Mind you, I take no credit from them gents. They were good solid men who helped our country a lot. But why don't you give some credit to Bear Buscoe?

Maybe it's 'cause he could do things like no other person that a lot became plumb jealous of him. I admit there were some who did hate him a bit—like Mike Trevis, Lou Gillie, and Bill Pearly who made a living trappin' beaver. Never will I forget the day when my pal says to the three of them varmints.

"You keep your traps away from Crandell's Creek. That's my property; leave my beavers alone."

Maybe you know that folks said Bear Buscoe could speak to the animals and understand them? I saw it with my own eyes at Crandell's Creek. We was up there on the bank watching some beavers cuttin' down a couple of cottonwood trees. One of them old beavers spots my pal and comes over to him. They palaver for a while and then Bear Buscoe speaks to me.

"Asked me to help 'em a bit. Building a house for a beaver family what's gettin' some young ones."

Bear Buscoe gits up from the bank and twists a couple of trees right out from the ground. Them beavers is heap smart critters; make like a chain gang. Bear Buscoe hands the tree to the first beaver and he passes it on to the next. Then it goes under water. And in no time they done finished that house as a present. So my pal comes back to me and we sit on the bank. Then his keen eyes spot them three varmints. They was wading in the cold stream. In them days they didn't use hip boots. Settin' their traps where they figured there was beaver.

I could see how blasted mad Bear Buscoe was; I knowed he had a-warned them to keep away from this stream. He just waited till they left and then waded into the stream. With one big scoop of his hand he gathered all of the traps, 'bout sixty of them. And he resets six of them. The rest he hides in the bushes. We sit there for two whole weeks and wait. Mike Trevis, Lou Gillie, and Bill Pearly come up and start into the water. All of a sudden they screams, as if the injuns were a-liftin' their scalps. Each of them varmints is trapped by his own traps!

"I warned you to stay away from here," says my pal as he shows up near them. "Now maybe you get learned a lesson."

Bear Buscoe makes a peculiar noise with his lips and some of them beavers come up from their houses. They go over to him and he says somethin' low to 'em. Soon they go away and all the beavers come back. They sit on both sides of the creek and look at the trapped trappers.

"What are they goin' to do to us?" shouts Mike Trevis.

"Help us," pleads Bill Pearly.

"I'll drown," screams Lou Gillie.

Them critters do nothing but sit still, while the trappers can't move. All night long. In the morning my pal releases the men and they swear never to come back. But Bear Buscoe doesn't trust 'em.

"Only one way to save my beavers." he sort of admits. "I must figure out a new kind of hat what uses no beaver skin."

WELL, MY pal leaves me and says he'll meet me in a month at Fort Creston. From others I hear what Bear Buscoe did. Got some silk from a chinaman and made a silk hat. Soon as folks saw it they didn't buy beaver hats. Means no trappers goin' after them critters. They certainly were grateful to him. Next time you see a beaver gnawing at a cottonwood tree, look at the markings he makes. It comes out T.T.B.B: *That means Thanks To Bear Buscoe.*

Well, at the end of a month Bear Buscoe shows up at the Fort. He gets the news from the Major: The Pajama Injuns is on the warpath. Some folks what are snakes been sellin' them that poison stuff what makes them go on the hunt for scalps.

The Major is worried. "Got barrels of balls for the guns. But no powder and no caps; they'll scalp our soldiers."

The major wasn't worried about himself; he was all bald and had no scalp to lose. There's a quiet man at the Fort; he is Dr. Gatling. You heard about the Gatling Gun? It was Bear Buscoe who gave him the idea.

Them injuns was gathered on Big Hill for the attack on the Fort. Bear Buscoe tells the Major and the soldiers what to do.

"You go inside and play mumbly pegs. I'll handle this by myself with my pal at my side."

I feels good to hear them words. All Bear Buscoe wants is a barrel of lead balls and a small piece of pipe. He has me drop 100 lead balls into his mouth. He puts the pipe in between his lips. Then he is ready for action.

Up on the Big Hill, Chief-Riding-For-a-Fall gives the big order.

"Guzzga". That in the injun languages means: "One group to the flank; the other to the rear; third with me. We all get big heap scalps plenty quick."

Soon as they was in range of his pipe, Bear Buscoe starts to blow them lead balls right through the barrel. One hundred in a minute. Then I drop another load into his mouth. He blows them out again.

Then injuns niver knew what happened; they called it the Devil Gun. He hits each redskin plum smack on the head right in the middle, above the nose. Each one falls off his horse and is on the ground. In ten minutes to the second the attack is finished. So is the injuns.

"Major," says Bear Buscoe. "You get your men out there; tie up the hands and legs of the injuns."

Not one of them was killed. They brought them inside the Fort and poured water over 'em. When they was thimselves again Bear Buscoe gives them a long talk. They swear to behave themselves. But when he shows them in a mirror the mark each has on his head they got a new name for the tribe.

"Spotted Injuns" is what Chief Riding-For-a-Fall calls his braves. And Dr. Gatling saw it all, and that's where he got the idea for his gun.

★

There was one flaw in Joe Sands' masquerade as a ranger...

THE TALL STRANGER

by ART BAKER

HOOF BEATS driving at him put Joe Sands up the bank and into the protection of a line of juniper. There was a good moon. His nickled bead drew a clear target point, and the oncoming rider was sure to pass right under him. This was strange country to Joe, but any man pushing that desperately up the trail toward Batchelor's ranch represented danger. He watched as the horse thundered over the log bridge that spanned Hunter's Creek and grunted into the slope that led up to the old stone fort. Its flying hooves struck blue foxfire from the flat rocks.

If this was Lew Batchelor, where was the kid? "You don't have to hurt Jimmy," she'd said; "be careful you don't. He's just a child, Joe. Nine, I think. He'll be close by Lew when you find them, so be careful, I don't want Jimmy hurt. It isn't necessary."

But Joe had other ideas. Kids were known to grow up and come hunting the man who killed their father. So if this was Lew, something must have gone wrong in a big way to make him leave the kid and shuck for home alone this way.

Joe checked the stock of his new Stevens seven-shot and fired. The crash rolled down the canyon, slapping from wall to wall like the spanking thunder of a distant storm. The rider was picked out of his saddle like a rag and thrown into the thicket along the roadside. It was a clean shot, and Joe smiled. He was a lean, rangy man of twenty-eight years with grey green eyes, and sharp hawkish features that reflected the tenderness of a hungry cougar.

The corpse was light and he dragged it easily out of the brush and into the trail. The pockets yielded a flat wallet tied with a rawhide thong, and the moonlight was strong enough to make out that this was not Lew Batchelor.

No, indeed! The identifications revealed that he had killed none other than the fastest gun out of El Paso! At least most men allowed Jack Dragg that reputation.

Joe rolled the corpse with his boot. He certainly didn't look like much. But then, a Ranger didn't have to be tall to throw a long shadow, and a gun didn't have to hang high to be fast. Joe laughed softly; so this was the end for the much dreaded Texan—a mountain trail in the moonlight where any fool should have expected an ambush. Well—almost the end. Jack Dragg still had one more job to do, and Joe pocketed the Ranger's identification, pleased at his own cunning in turning this fortunate situation to even greater profit.

Joe had ridden three hundred miles to a rendezvous with the woman who had left him to go straight. She had written him things of great promise, and it seemed she had not lied. She had warned him of Jack Dragg's presence in Ten Mile, but she had assured him that no one but Treece knew about it. That was less than an hour ago as they lay in the grass farther up the mountain side. Her body warmth still clung about him, the feel of her still in his hands as he lifted the small corpse and heaved it deep into the brush with a threshing of dry switches and a flailing of dead arms. Joe mounted quickly and headed for Ten Mile. If Emmy Lu was going to be a rich widow, he had work to do tonight.

THE TALL stranger picked up his stack of silver and let it slip through his fingers with the soft, running clink of metal, over and over. The dealer glanced at him with irritation, but he said nothing, for the tall stranger was a quiet man in all other ways. He had black hair and wore fine clothes. His fingers were long and supple as a gambler's should be; his well-set features were cold as a graveside preacher. John, the gambler, wore no guns; and yet those who did wear them were strangely respectful of this man.

It was past two in the morning, still the *Spinning Dollar* was going full blast, as were the other saloons in Ten Mile. It had been ten years since they'd had a hanging, and the one scheduled for morning was an occasion for real celebrating. Although remote from any other point of civilization, Ten Mile was strategically located midway in the Saginaw pass; and while it could eke a bare existence from the trade of surrounding ranches, and the few modest mining companies, what luxury they enjoyed came from business with the U. S. Indian Agent at the Commanche Reservation. Consequently, the Green Patch bandit had created an economic hardship the past two years by his uncanny ability to pick out the stages which carried the Indian Agent's semi-annual allotment of funds, picking the rugged terrain between Ten Mile and the reservation, always, to make his deadly ambush.

More than ten drivers and guards had been slain by this highwayman, who never left a witness to his handiwork. Two or three cowboys had seen him from a distance, and noted the green scarf he wore over his face; but none had got close enough to give the smallest description beyond that. Finally, the government had sent a detachment of dragoons to ride with the stage between Ten Mile and the reservation, which would put an end to the outrages—everyone thought.

The Green Patch bandit had shown his contempt by sneaking into town and taking the money right out from under their noses. The dragoons were not expected for three days, but who would suspect that the strong box were not safe in the vault of the freight office? Citizens were justifiably enraged when the vault door was found open, the money gone, and George Treece, local agent for the Santa Fe Freight Line, flattened in a great carpet of blood, his throat slashed from ear to ear.

The tall stranger had seen them bring Lew Batchelor and his boy into town—a bewildered, frightened pair driven along between the riders of Sheriff Eugene Hardesty's posse. Less than two hours ride had brought them back, which was unusually swift for the rounding-up of a desperado who had been operating so successfully the past years. Of course, the outlaw had broken from his much-practised routine by coming into town to make his strike, and that might account for this first failure. And although Lew certainly did not look the type to kill so savagely, they had found the strongbox in his possession, and the notorious green mask.

There might have been a lynching on the spot, except that Sheriff Hardesty suggested they build a gallows the width of main street and tall as the church, so that the Green Patch bandit would hang high enough for all to see and enjoy. With Lew behind bars, Hardesty and three of his men retired to the *Spinning Dollar* for a belated supper.

Two of these men were his well known deputies; the other, a hawk-faced young man, was the Texas Ranger, Jack Dragg, and the room was abuzz with the sound of his name for many minutes after they'd seated themselves at a table. The fourth party, barely able to get his elbows on the table, was Jimmy Batchelor. He sat with his face buried in his hands, and his thin shoulders trembled. Sheriff Hardesty had brought the boy along to keep him safe from the angry crowd that milled up and down the streets, moving from bar to bar. At least this is what John heard from those about him.

Occasionally, when a gap fell in the raw edge of voices, and the glassy clanking of the discordant piano, he could hear the pounding and sawing going on out in the street. The number of volunteer carpenters was limited only by the shortage of tools in town. And men stood by to spell those who tired.

THE DEALER said, "Well, what you got, John? You in this game or not?"

John turned up a black king on top of his black ten. "Twenty."

"Twenty be damned!" The dealer took another card, which broke him.

"Your trouble," John told him; "you don't keep a tally on what's been turned under. The odds change." He picked up his winnings and made his way to Sheriff Hardesty's table.

"You want something, John?" Gene Hardesty was a man with steel in his voice, even when he was saying his prayers at Sunday meeting. At forty, grey fringes already touched the temples of his reddish hair. He had been the fastest gun in Ten Mile until less than an hour ago, when Jack Dragg rode in and produced his credentials and a warrant for the arrest and detention of the Green Patch Bandit.

"I've got a plan how you can get the prisoner out of town, Gene."

The man who sat across the table, facing John, slowly raised his eyes. "Who is this crazy son?" he demanded.

Hardesty spoke quickly. "John, meet Jack Dragg. I suppose you've heard he's here to—"

"I've heard, Gene; that's why I thought he'd be interested in seeing the prisoner get a legal trial. Once that gallows is finished, you're going to have a lynching in this town; I hope you know that."

A shudder passed through the boy's thin body, and he buried his face deeper into the clutch of his hands. His breath left him in a tight, hoarse sob, but that was the only sound he made.

Jack Dragg rose from his chair, hand dropped to the butt of his revolver. "Git on about your business, gamblin' man," he said. "We'll take care of the prisoner; that's *our* business. Now git!"

"Well, I'd like to see the prisoner for a few minutes, Gene," the tall stranger suggested, ignoring the hostile man across from him. "George Treece

was my friend; I want the right man to hang for it."

"Then just step outside an' wait," Dragg snapped at him. "You'll see the prisoner and you'll see the right man hang at the same time! One thing I don't like is a man with a big mouth who ain't got the nerve to wear guns. That's you, gamblin' man. I don't like you! So git along, or I'll throw you in keep too, for obstructin' justice."

"Justice?" John smiled. "Tell you what, Mister Dragg. I'm a gambler, not a gun-fighter, so I'll bet you a hundred dollars you don't hang that man. Not if I get the chance to talk with him."

"Wait!" Gene rose between the two of them. "I've got to get back to the jail, anyhow; I'll take him along and see he doesn't try anything. You men keep a watch on the boy here."

As he turned from the table, Jimmy Batchelor suddenly rose and started to follow. Dragg snatched out and caught him by the arm, twisting it painfully as he slammed the boy back into his chair. A thin cry broke from the boy, but he quickly smothered it with his hands, and again withdrew into the shelter of his folded arms and high tucked knees.

The two deputies sat stony faced. Dragg remained standing, a slash smile across his face, waiting for John to say something. But Sheriff Hardesty guided the gambling man out of the *Spinning Dollar* before tempers erupted into bloodshed.

A HANGING lantern dishpanned its yellow beam across Sheriff Hardesty's desk. John fingered the busted hasp on the strong box, then opened the lid and observed the small sacks bulging with gold and silver coin, the sheafs of bank certificates tied with brown cord.

"Hard to believe the man who killed George Treece would be caught the ing in toward town with all this conway Batchelor was caught, Gene—riddemning evidence in his hands."

"I thought you wanted to see the prisoner."

"In a minute." John picked up the notorious green mask and inspected it. Cheap linsey woolsey cloth, wrinkled and water spotted. The dye appeared to be a vegetable coloring, such as the Indians used. "You'd ought to poke around in the brush a bit before you lynch this man, Gene; I think he's innocent."

Hardesty took the mask from his hands and dropped it to the desk. "You're new here, so I'll let the remark pass, but I'm getting a little tired of hearing you use that word—and you know the one I mean." His eyes were sharp with anger. "Four stage drivers, a half dozen guards we got buried back of town; they were our people, had wives, kids, relatives. These people want this prisoner, John. If I try to hold the doors, I'd gave to shoot down a lot of good men—and they'd get the prisoner, anyway. I've stalled things long enough to get a gallows built. This keeps order and peace—no lynching. The man was caught red-handed; now do you wanta talk to him or not?"

John shrugged and turned away from the desk. A man with a double barrelled shotgun leaned in the outer doorway. Hardesty motioned toward a closed door that led into the adobe annex which housed four solid cells. The only bars were those on the heavy doors. There was a foul smell from the lack of windows and ventilation. The only light came from three lanterns hanging along the corridor.

Batchelor was in his middle thirties, powerful, with the wiry, rawboned look that hard work lies upon a man. A swelling under his left eye was turning blue, and blood was crusted at the corners of his puffed lips. He rose off the stool as they approached. "Where's my boy?"

"He's in good hands, Lew," Gene said as he unlocked the door. "Don't worry about Jimmy."

"Bring him here, Gene! Bring my

boy here to me! He's got nobody else! He's gonna be all alone after—"

Suddenly Gene swung about. He caught John by the shoulder and sent him reeling in through the cell door. "You won't be makin' trouble for us in there, John. Nor for yourself. You'll have the rest of the night to say what you figured was so important to say to Thad."

"Hardesty! For the love of God, man!—" Batchelor pled. But Gene closed the door to his office without looking back.

Lew Batchelor had been beaten. It did not show so much on his face, but he stood unsteadily, slightly caved in the middle where fists or boots had been driven into his stomach. "My boy; what'll they do with him?"

There was no answer to that question. John locked his fingers about the heavy bars and cursed silently, desperately.

"Why are they doing this?" Thad Batchelor groaned. "All my life, I never hurt anybody. Nobody at all!"

John turned to look at the big hulk of a man, the simplicity in his large face. It was easy to believe this statement.

"Don't try to make sense out of this, Lew. Tonight this town is one big snarling animal without a lick of humanity in it. Even the sheriff's scared of it."

"But, Jimmy! What's he going to do, Mister? He's got nobody but me. Nine years old; he can't shift for himself. How's he gonna live without me to care for him?"

"You aren't dead yet."

LEW SEEMED not to hear John's reply. He moved to the wall and listened to the faint throb of pounding that penetrated the thick adobe walls. "They're workin' fast out there. They won't make my boy watch, will they? Couldn't they take him outa town for a spell so he won't know when it happens?"

John had to look away. He returned to the cell door and stood staring out at nothing. "How did you come to have that strong box and the mask, Lew?"

It was silent for some time, then the rancher moved to his stool and sat down. "I tried to tell 'em this. I found that box, Mister. That is, me an' Jimmy, we—" His words broke off and he took a deep breath. "Well, I didn't get a chance to tell 'em this, but we saw 'im hide it in a thicket off the side of the road: an' when he left, we got the box and was bringin' it in when the posse rode up. I tried to tell 'em—!"

"Just a minute!" John turned quickly. "You *saw* the man who cached that strong box? Do you know who it was, for God's sake?"

Thad nodded. "Charlie Whipple; he's got a cabin up on Indian Creek above my place. Charlie didn't see us. We waited till he rode off." Lew looked up and saw the consternation on John's face. "I was going to tell the sheriff, Mister, only they wouldn't listen; besides, they wouldn't 'a' believed—seein' it was Charlie Whipple."

"What makes him above suspicion?"

Lew dropped his head and shrugged wearily. "Well, I got a woman, Mister. Not Jimmy's mother—she's dead seven years now; another woman I married two summers back. Fine lookin' girl, Emmy Lu, some younger'n me."

He hesitated and rubbed a hand across his face, as though gathering the courage to continue. "I wanted Jimmy to have a mother. Guess I was taken some by her good looks, too. I work hard and I live lean. Emmy Lu wasn't cut out for that. I reckon everyone in Ten Mile knows about it, about her an' Charlie Whipple. There's others, too; George Treece for one.

"I guess you get right down to it, she was no good at all. I could name half a dozen men in this town had their time with Emmy Lu, and no doubt there's more I ain't heard about. I never let myself believe there was any-

thing to it, really. Down in my heart I reckon I knew, but I wouldn't admit it. Jimmy needed a mother, and she was good to us around the house. I think she liked Jimmy, even if the boy didn't take to her so much.

"Well, you see what I mean, Mister. Everybody liked Charlie Whipple; George, too. And nobody has much respect for a man who lets his wife play around. I had the best reason for killin' George, and anything I say about Charlie will look like I'm tryin' to get even with him, too." He shook his head in puzzlement. "Charlie was such a little man to be stirrin' up all this trouble."

"A little man?" John was deep in thought. The things Lew said built a pattern which made sense of some queer circumstances that had been bothering John. Any further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Jack Dragg. He stood at the cell door and asked, "Still offerin' that bet, gamblin' man?"

John started to curse him, but suddenly hesitated. Then he nodded. "I made the offer and it stands. Get Sheriff Hardesty in here and I'll put up my hundred." He dug a stack of yellow coins from his coat pocket, holding them so the hawk-faced young man could see.

Hardesty expressed irritation when Dragg explained his reason for calling, but Gene said nothing. He accepted the money John handed through the bars to him. "And I can tell you where to locate the loot from the stage holdups," John said, "if you'd care to listen."

IT HAD BEEN worth a hundred dollars to get the sheriff's attention, and Dragg was quick to recognize that he'd been a tool in the tall stranger's plan. He cursed and tried to get the sheriff to leave, but Hardesty was curious.

"What do you know about that loot, John? Is it the same pile of bull Lew was tryin' to sell us?"

"I don't have to tell you anything; you'll be able to see for yoursef. Just to get that green mask from your office."

Hardesty's eyes quickened with suspicion. "Don't play me for a fool, John. Don't make that mistake."

"I'm dead serious." And the ring of his words piqued the sheriff further. The green mask was brought in by a deputy. Gene snatched it from the man's hand and inspected it minutely before handing it through to John.

"Now, watch closely, Sheriff. See those wrinkles where the knot's been tied?" John fitted the mask about Batchelor's face and brought the ends back. The hard twists came just behind his ears. "Either this man's head has swelled a whole lot in a few hours, or you should be out looking for a smaller suspect, Gene. Lew never could have worn this mask!"

"That could'a been where he kept it tied around his neck!" Dragg exploded. "Could be he let it out when he used it for a mask!"

"Yes, that *could* be the answer," John agreed, "but it raises a serious doubt, doesn't it, Gene? Doubt enough to call for postponing the lynching?"

"Who ever heard of postponing a lynching? Ever try postponing a flood or a stampede?" Gene fired back, his face washing with color.

"The gallows won't be finished for some hours yet. You know what it is I'm askin', Gene."

"I never ran across a gambler yet who wasn't full of tricks!" Dragg commented acidly. "Let's go on back to the office, Sheriff; we're just wastin' time here."

But Gene Hardesty had been cornered by the tall stranger's bone-hard sincerity and by his own conscience. "You got something to work on?"

"I wouldn't get involved if I wasn't positive; sure I've got something to work on."

In the office, Gene picked two deputies to ride with him. The remainder

of his posse was left to stand shotgun guard over the prisoner. John suggested they take the boy along, but Hardesty refused.

"Jimmy stays here!" he snapped, "and you men keep 'im with you. Don't let him get near his old man. If our clever gambler here can't turn up that missing loot from the past two years, the kid will make Lew tell us where the money is. Comes time for the hangin', Lew'll tell us anything just to see his kid one last time."

Jimmy let out a cry at Gene's words and turned himself hard against the wall where he stood in a trembling huddle, trying to make himself as small and withdrawn as possible.

"Real brave men, all of you," John commented quietly. "Shall we get going?"

DARKNESS began to lift when they were little more than an hour on the trail. Ghostly shapes of pine and juniper rose about them as they moved briskly along the stage road that led to Fort Comanche, and on into Laredo.

"This is about where we met Batchelor," Hardesty said.

"Mmhmm. And riding into town with the strongbox in his hands; that still sounds mighty like an innocent man's actions to me."

"It was a smart trick, if it had worked. And I hope you didn't drag me out here to argue Batchelor's case. My opinion couldn't stop that hangin' any more'n a cloud can stop a windstorm."

John glanced at him sharply. "There's one big difference, Gene—it's your job to try. But I didn't come out here to argue anything; just keep a sharp lookout for signs leading off the road."

"What are we lookin' for?"

"A dead man."

"What kind of nonsense are you up to, Mister? A dead man! Are you just stallin' for time?"

"No. There's a man's body out here somewhere, and we've got to find it. You see, there weren't any strangers in town today besides myself—which means the man who rode in and killed George Treece was a native who didn't attract any attention by being there. George must have trusted him, because there wasn't any struggle. Still, I can't see George opening the vault for anyone, since the Federal money was in there."

"A gun in your belly makes you do a lot of things."

"Not a gun, Gene; a knife. The killer had to get behind him, close. The vault was already open. George didn't suspect anything. Doesn't that suggest something to you?"

Hardesty studied his remark with suspicion sharp on his features. He reached the obvious conclusion John was driving at, and he blurted, "Hogwash! Treece was a straight man in all ways!"

"Even where women were concerned, Gene?"

"Treece was a single man," the sheriff fired back. "What women he played with was his own business!"

"Not when there's a husband involved."

Hardesty turned an impatient look upon the two deputies behind him, brought them forward with a shag of his head. "We're at the Batchelor ranch trail, John. I think this is far enough: you've had your chance at whatever it is you're up to, now you're under arrest. Lew must have told you something in that cell. I got a notion you're tryin' to keep me out here so's I can't get in a last few words with him before they hang 'im."

THE DEPUTIES closed in alongside the tall stranger. He made no move to resist. "You really think this is far enough, Gene? I don't; I think the answer to everything is up that trail—like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. I'll bet a thousand dol-

lars against Batchelor's life that I'm right."

Batchelor shook his head in puzzled concern. "Do you really think I'm stupid, John, or are you a little fuzzy between the ears yourself? What's a thousand dollars compared to the loot you might have a line on?"

"I'm a gambler, not a crook; I'm not after the Green Patch loot for myself."

"Then why you so interested in this man's life?"

"I've got my reasons. And I've got a thousand dollars that says we'll find the answer up that trail. You boys on?"

Hardesty pulled out his heavy gold watch, glanced at the dial, then looked up at the gray dawning sky above. He nodded. "We got time to ride a ways yet; I'll take the lead."

They were across the log bridge over Hunter's Creek and hard into the incline that led to the stone fort when Sheriff Hardesty suddenly piled out of his saddle and stepped into the thorny underbrush alongside the trail. "By God! There's been a fight here!" he called back, pointing to where the dry branches were broken down. "There's something down there in the gully!"

Charley Whipple was sprawled across grey rocks on the creek bank, face down and arms folded underneath him. John knelt and unbuckled the gunbelt. One revolver was still in its holster. He found the other under some broken shrubs. "Get that knife out of his belt, Gene. I think you'll find blood on it— George Treece's blood."

THE ANIMAL had broken its tether in Ten Mile when they arrived. The blood cry of enraged men thundered in the streets. Hardesty forced room for his mount in front of his office and heaved the small body of Charlie Whipple onto the porch. The door had been crashed in. Glass and splintered boards strewed the area. Gene dismounted and threw himself at the two men holding Jimmy Batchelor between them. He tried to tear their hands from the boy's arms, and failing this, clubbed them with the barrel of his revolver, loosing the child's cruelly twisted limbs as the men reeled away from the brutal slash of steel.

John drove his horse through the snarling press of humanity that encircled the gallows. They beat and kicked at the floundering animal, but it wedged through and put John against the platform before it stopped. He swung out of the saddle and placed himself at the head of the crude stairway just as Jack Dragg and a dozen rough handlers started shoving the desperately struggling figure of Thad Batchelor up toward the noose.

"It's all over; turn 'im loose, boys!" He did not raise his voice inordinately, but it carried, and it seemed to wash the angry faces with silence. The crowd fell back, for the tall stranger had shed his coat, and the two revolvers holstered at his sides were visible to all. There was no movement at all on the stairs for several moments, then hands fell from the prisoner, and men withdrew. All except the hawk-faced ringleader of the lynch mob—the man who called himself Jack Dragg.

"Don't let 'em get away with this!" he shouted; "what's the matter with you fishbellies?"

"Why don't *you* handle the job?" the tall stranger suggested. "You're the man with the fastest gun out of El Paso. Or are you?"

"I'll give you one chance to get out of here!" the fellow levelled at him in a voice tight with menace. "And that's the only thing you'll get outa me, gamblin' man!"

"Your bluff's burned out, killer; and so has your luck. You know Lew Batchelor isn't guilty of these crimes, and you were the only man in town who did know, for sure. But you wanted him dead, and I'd like to know why—"

The hawk-faced one seized his advantage and drew with his hands on

gun butts. It was a clean, smooth draw, but the tall stranger beat him by a brief measure. His right hand fired, a single blast quickly followed by two others as the lean man fired into the ground a few feet ahead of himself, raising two pillows of dust where the slugs buried themselves. He took one staggering pace forward, trying with a teeth-gnashing effort to bring his guns up to bear on the tall stranger.

Terror filled his eyes as he saw the smile on the dark face above him. Some flickering of intuition gave him the truth an instant before he collapsed face down in the dirt, placing his corpse between the dust luffs raised by his own misspent slugs, as though he had carefully marked the place for his falling.

John knelt over the dead man and took a wallet from his hip pocket. The papers seemed to be in order. No man raised a hand to interfere as he placed the identification in the inside pocket of his coat, which was now draped over his arm. "You've seen a man die," he threw at the crowd. "That's what you came for! Now break it up and go home!" But the awed throng did not budge.

Then Jimmy Batchelor broke from the encirclement and ran to his father. Thad gathered his boy up in long, powerful arms and clutched his as though he meant to crush every bone in his body! The tears that broke from his haunted eyes, and the deep, choking sob that welled out of him like a cry of pain did more than the tall stranger's words to loosen the tight formation of the mob. They moved away until father and son were quite alone there by the gallows.

SHERIFF HARDESTY came for the tall man. Emmy Lu Batchelor had arrived in town just before the mob got organized, and she was in the sheriff's office now where she had missed all the excitement.

She rose from her chair as they entered, a small and very beautiful girl with big dark eyes and fair skin. Her hair trailed about her shoulders. There was paint on her lips, and a deep cleft in the bodice of her dress which revealed too much of the soft swelling bosom.

"She rode in with these two money sacks. Said she found 'em where Lew's been hidin' 'em under the floor of their pump house."

"That's the straw that broke the camel's spine," he commented; "just the spark the mob needed."

"I—I didn't know Lew was in trouble," she stammered. "This was all I found. Just these two sacks of money. I didn't think he'd taken all the rest, hidden it somewhere else—I didn't know! I didn't know!"

"You're a liar, Mrs. Batchelor; you know Lew didn't steal anything. You've been playing with George Treece and Charlie Whipple, and the three of you are guilty of the Green Patch crimes. George supplied Charlie with stage and shipment schedules; Charlie robbed and killed. You kept the loot, and kept the boys entertained. You're quite a woman, at that. Only I'd like to know who this man was you hired to come in and liquidate your partners. Who was he, Mrs. Batchelor?"

"Mister—you better know what you're talkin' about!" Hardesty admonished.

"I do. Lew saw Charlie Whipple hide that strong box. Mrs. Batchelor hired this new fellow to kill her husband; that was her second doublecross. She arranged with Charlie to put George Treece out of the way. Obviously she meant to get Charlie, too, only her new love upset the schedule by killing Charlie first, on the Batchelor ranch trail. I knew he'd killed Charlie when he showed up here with my identification papers. With Treece, Whipple and Batchelor dead, they'd have had the Green Patch loot and the Batchelor ranch all to themselves.

"You filthy liar!" Emy Lu blurted,

her maidenly decor fading behind her fury, "You can't prove—"

"Don't need any further proof," he replied. "*I'm* Jack Dragg, as some folks here have probably figured out. I came to help the government find the Green Patch. When I rode in, I left my credentials in the vault with George Treece. George told Emmy Lu, obviously, and she told her new lover. She also told him that nobody else in town knew about my presence except George, and he would soon be dead. She had to be the one to tell him, or why would he have had the nerve to ride in here posing as me? He thought he'd killed me when he found my papers on Charlie Whipple; that was the mistake that cost them everything. And I ask you again, who was that fellow, Mrs. Batchelor?"

She was pale with rage and fear, but the Ranger's tonal inflection got through to her. "Who—*was*—?" she stammered.

"Yes. I just killed him, Mrs. Batchelor. Your husband is still alive."

The shock of his words held her frozen for an instant. Then she screamed out hysterically and her hand darted inside her shawl. "You dirty, meddling—" her words were lost in the sharp crack of the small pistol in her hand!

Jack spun, but not quickly enough. The first slug stung his shoulder as he threw himself sideways to the floor. The second spanking shot bit dust from the boards inches above his head. and then a blast shook the office! And it became suddenly very quiet.

Emmy Lu lay half on her side, knees drawn up and her hands pressed into her chest. Her face was hidden by the sprawl of her thick, dark tresses.

LEW BATCHELOR let the gun fall from his fingers. "She'd 'a' killed you, Mister Dragg," he said in an empty voice. "Emmy Lu, she was my wife—"

"I know."

"I never killed anyone before. Never killed anyone—"

"We all know that, too, Lew."

Lew looked at him. There was nothing in his eyes; the mind behind them was mercifully numbed. He turned then and made his way through the crowd which readily gave him passage through their ranks. Across the street, they had hanged the corpse of Charlie Whipple from a stringer outside the freight office. Their savagery spent, they felt bitter ad ashamed in the presence of this man they had so nearly murdered.

Jack fingered the flesh wound on his shoulder. It was not bleeding badly. "You'll find the rest of that loot somewhere near the Batchelor ranch, Gene. Certainly not in the pump house, though; look in a place you'd expect a woman to hide things."

"I know I should feel grateful to you, Ranger," Gene replied, "but there's something about you that makes a man keep his distance. It's like you touch a thing, it dies."

Jack Dragg looked down at the dead woman, then lifted his eyes to the empty gallows. "There are worse things, Sheriff," he said.

Chagrin held the men in silence around him, but their eyes were full of brooding bitterness. It was that moment that Jimmy Batchelor turned at his father's side and called back down the pathway that had opened in the crowd. There was a tear in his voice, and the words carried sharply in his

small boy soprano, "God must like you a lot, Mister Dragg!"

The message was too simple and sincere to be distorted, even in minds eagerly seeking self-absolution. The rigidity went out of the faces surrounding Jack Dragg. A very small boy's parting cry had driven shame like a needle into inflated self-righteousness, and when Jack Dragg left the office, not an eye could meet him straight on. There was not likely to be another lynch mob in Ten Mile until these generations had passed on, and their children no longer could remember the soft-told tale of the Tall Stranger with the touch of death.

★

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR RANGE TERMS?

Extra Feature by James A. Hines

Some of the 20 common range terms listed below are correctly defined; others are not. Test your own knowledge of the language of the rangeland in the following manner: if you think a statement true, write a "T" after it; if you believe it is false, write an "F" after it. Then turn to page 130 to check your answers. If you get 15 correct, you're a yearling; 16 makes you a long yearling; 17, a two-year old; 18, a three-year old; and 19 or 20 correct makes you an old mossyhorn. Supposing your score is under 15? Then you're just a li'l dogie!

1. A cavvy is a band of saddle horses.
2. "Nester" is an opprobrious term meaning cattle-thief.
3. To snake means to drag by a rope.
4. A bronco is a well-trained saddle horse.
5. Cattle off their home range are called strays.
6. When a bronc bucks in one spot he is sunfishing.
7. "Wet stock" is a term meaning stolen stock.
8. To fork a horse means to discipline him.
9. A maverick is a motherless heifer.
10. A waddy is a bronc-breaking expert.
11. A cayuse is a horse that has been spoiled in breaking.
12. Branding consists of marking cattle with the owner's mark.
13. A hazer is a hand who assists the buster in breaking horses.
14. Kack is another term for saddle.
15. A hot-roll is a fancy bit of bucking.
16. A slick-ear is an animal which hasn't been ear-marked.
17. Tapaderos are heavy gauntlets worn in winter.
18. A cross-buck is a pack saddle.
19. A dogie is an unbranded bull calf.
20. Stragglers from the herd are called tailings.

★

Special Feature

SHE PLAYED CHECKERS

The Story of Jane Long

by Sam Allison

JANE LONG was an extraordinary woman; she parlayed a game of checkers into a handsome, interesting husband. She spent the next several years chasing him over the state of Texas, getting in and out of revolutions, facing starvation and Karankawa Indians. She was to be called the Mother of Texas, for she was probably the first woman of the American immigrants to settle in Texas and stay there—and she made the first Lone Star flag of Texas.

She met her destiny in 1815, when Americans wounded at the Battle of New Orleans were sent to private homes for recovery. One such man arrived at the plantation called Propinquity, near Natchez.

Jane Long's father had died, but her mother had seen that she learned to read and write enough to be literate, to card and spin wool and to embroider and weave, make quilts, to cook in an open fireplace, and to make soap. But one morning when Jane was 17, she had her bonnet on and her books in her hands, when Kian, her negro maid and companion, told her breathlessly that the handsomest man in the world was upstairs with the wounded soldier.

Jane did not hesitate; she put her books aside, took off her bonnet, and waited in the parlor. For an orphan, Jane showed remarkable presence of mind. She was said to be beautiful and vivacious, with dark curled hair, shining brown eyes, and satin smooth cheeks.

Dr. Long came downstairs and entered the parlor. He, too, had presence of mind, and challenged her to a game of checkers—which Jane won. A few days later they were planning to be married.

Jane's family objected. Perhaps they sensed what an associate said of Long later: "Daring, impetuous. . .impulsive and would today do a thing to regret tomorrow."

But he was tall, erect, and active, with burning eyes and a purposeful walk. Jane had made up her mind.

Her relatives insisted she choose a guardian, hoping to break up the match; but Jane confounded them by choosing Dr. Long as guardian. There was quite a battle over it, but Jane won.

In the next four years, Long and his wife went from a wilderness plantation to a merchant's status in Natchez. The Mississippi town at that time was the gateway to the great Southwest—and it was the age of plots and counterplots. Aaron Burr came to Natchez. General Wilkinson was in Mobile. Blennerhassett, the other member of the plotting three, was a cotton planter in Mississippi. Bolivar was overthrowing the Spanish in Venezuela, and the Mexicans were fighting Spain south of the Rio Grande.

REMEMBER that when the United States bought Louisiana, President Jefferson was most concerned immediately about getting Florida—which controlled the outlet of almost every river in the South. Texas was an unknown quantity; nobody knew how big it was, whether it had any value, or to whom it legally belonged. So after sixteen years (in 1819) the Adams-

Onis Treaty was signed, assuring Florida to the U. S. Now they had Florida and they had the free use of the Mississippi, but some felt that wasn't enough.

An indignation meeting was held in Natchez to raise money for an expedition to free Texas from the royal Spanish yoke. James Long pledged his entire fortune—possibly as much as $80,000. He was promptly elected general.

General Long was 26 years old, and it can be imagined that Jane was quite proud. They had one child and were expecting another, but she wanted to go with him on the expedition. This wish she did not get, but she and her sister made a flag—designed by Long—of white silk, with fringes of red; it had a red ground in the upper corner with a single white star. This is not the same as the present state flag of Texas, but is its logical predecessor.

With much ceremony and many cannon shots, Geenral Long left Natchez in June, 1819, with 75 men. By the time he reached Nacogdoches on June 22, he had gathered recruits, and his force in the Old Stone House, organized a civil government, had a printing press operated by Horatio Biglow, raised the Lone Star flag, and declared Texas a republic.

It was momentous for some, but only an incident in the long history of Texas, for that state had been invaded by experts—and most of them had faded away.

On June 16 Long's second child had been born in Natchez. Twelve days later Jane took the two children, with Kian, and headed for Texas—without funds. At Natchez-Under-the-Hill she was found in tears by a friend, James Rowan. He took her on board a boat and said he would go with her to Alexandria. The boat went as far as it could, and they rode with the rest of the way—Jane and Kian on a horse, Rowan on a mule with one child behind him and the infant in his arms. Then he gave them money to get to Nacogdoches and a letter of credit for emergency.

Jane rented a team and carriage, left the children with her sister, and with several men as escorts set off into the wilderness. She stopped in Natchitoches, at the Sabine, on the Attoyac, tired, soaking wet, chilled to the bone—and the next morning went on, reaching Nacogdoches at sundown. Here she was the wife of the president of the new republic.

After some hasty maneuvering and a number of fast trips, Long, failing to get the help of Lafitte at Galveston, found his Nacogdoches army demoralized—there seemed to be women mixed up in affairs there—and the Spanish at his heels, with 700 soldiers. He beat a hasty retreat to the sanctuary of the Sabine.

Here they learned that the baby had died; the sheriff was holding Jane's possessions; and James' younger brother had been killed by Indians on the Trinity.

But Long was stubborn. He went to New Orleans to raise more money, leaving Jane in Alexandria. In the following February, he went to Bolivar, across Galveston Bay from Lafitte's colony. Jane herself went to see Lafitte to get his help, but accomplished nothing.

There were more trips back and forth, with Long trying to raise money, Jane making plans to leave their daughter with her sister. Long got help, but had to accept Jose Trespalacios as leader—for his new backers insisted on a Spaniard, to please the native Mexicans.

AFTER ENOUGH experiences to fill a book—she was stopped by a customs officer; she changed her mind and started back to Alexandria; she changed it again and headed for Bolivar—she finally reached the general in December, bringing Ann and Kian.

Now there was trouble with lack of supplies, with discontent of men doing nothing, with other women at the fort, with Trespalacios himself. Long went back and forth to New Orleans and the Sabine. Jane became pregnant. Then Long left for Mexicon with 50 soldiers.

The men at Bolivar began deserting; they took boats, equipment, tools. The doctors and their wives left, but Jane stayed. The last soldier deserted, taking all the food. The Karankawas were across the bay from the island where Jane was camped; occasionally she fired the cannon to scare them away.

That winter was extremely cold, with violent winds and snow and much freezing weather. Her third baby was born on December 21. The next day, with Kian very ill, Jane got up and collected frozen fish and put them in the brine of an empty pickle barrel.

Kian recovered, but the food problem was serious. Using a hammock as a seine, they caught three mullets. With these as bait, Jane used the last fishhook—but a big red fish took the mullet and she was forced to give up the line. From that time they lived on oysters.

Occasionally a boat would stop. A letter came from Long. Then the food gave out again. They went hungry for three days; then Jane found a fishing line with the big red fish she had lost a month before.

The first of Stephen Austin's colonists passed on the way to their settlement, and provided food. There were a hundred rumors about her husband: he was in Mexico City; he was about to return from Vera Cruz; he was a prisoner in the silver mines of Mexico.

A man named Smith appeared, rowing a boat loaded with all his goods, while his family walked on shore; they were hunting a home in Texas.

Jane left the island after almost a year there. By this time she knew most of the colonists, and they knew her. She established a boarding house, and Randal and James Jones boarded with her. Randal had helped her on her first trip to Texas.

Then a letter came from Refugio telling her of the "untimely death of General Long." Some thought he had been assassinated by Trespalacios—but nevertheless he was dead. Jane finally went to Bexar to seek damages from Trespalacios. She was accompanied by the Joneses. There was another period of living precariously, in one house or another. Then a Philadelphia merchant, who had known Long, paid her expenses and loaned her $1,000.

She got no restitution from Trespalacios. When the Philadelphia man came back, she went to New Orleans with his train. The youngest baby died in Louisiana. Ann was married, and Jane came back to Texas and took up her land grant of 1827. Milam built a cabin for her. In 1832 she opened a boarding house, in which lived the first three presidents of the Republic of Texas. Sam Houston and Mirabeau Lamar are said to have proposed to her, but she remained a gay and very lovely widow.

Ann died in 1870, leaving grandchildren. Jane Long lived on. She bought a Negro man and went to farming. She smoked a pipe filled with her own tobacco.

She died on Dec. 30, 1880, at the age of 82. She had traveled a long trail from that first game of checkers, but she was said always to get angry when anybody accused her of "setting her cap for" James Long.

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"Sell the ranch, Paint", old Potter advised his son. "Your Mother wanted you to be a painter, and I can see that's what you want, too. I won't be here much longer — so when I'm gone, you follow the trail you were meant to follow."

PAINTED HEAVEN

by FRANK MARKS

THE RANCHMEN called him 'Paint'. It wasn't because he rode a paint pony, but because he rode into the hills to spend days at his easel—days with brushes and paints in his feverish desire to capture the colors he saw in the rugged landscape and to get them onto his canvas.

At twenty-two, Paint Potter was slim and virile from his life on the 'Crown' ranch. It was fast becoming a rundown spread, with his failing father no longer able to handle it. Old Fred Potter had taught Paint to use a sixgun, toss a lariat and to do the general chores; but it was from his mother that Paint had acquired something much different from ranch life. It was the love of painting.

The morning after the rain, when the sun broke through the clouds to form a rainbow and wash the hills in pastel tints, Paint had all his equipment strapped on his pony. He was filling his canteen at the faucet over the trough when the kitchen door opened, and he turned to see his father on the threshold. Paint felt a wave of self-consciousness go through him; there were chores he might do around the ranch to help the few remaining cowhands. And then he looked toward the east at those changing colors on the horizon.

Old Fred's face showed the deep lines of struggle—a man in his sixties, and who now limped because a new bronc had reared and Fred's stiffening muscles were too slow to avoid the plunge he had taken. Fred glanced toward the tinted sky before he said, "Off for the hills again, Paint?"

Paint lowered his eyes and didn't know how to answer. He looked up. "Something you want me to do this morning, Dad?"

Fred Potter shook his head. "I guess not. You'd better keep at your painting, boy. It's what you want to do; it's what's your mother wanted you to do." Fred looked off over the range. "She never did get used to this country since I brought her from Boston. She was a dreamer; you take after her."

"Mother had the soul of an artist," Paint said.

"Yeah, I know." His eyes closed momentarily. "Forget this dying spread, Paint. Once I thought I could build it up into a big beef empire." He shook his head. "All stoved in now, good for nothing. I used to think—"

His voice trailed but Paint knew what he was about to say—that Paint could take over before they took Fred

out to rest beside his mother. Fred's voice had a tone of despair when he went on, "Better take what Nick Couvier offers us from the 'Crown' and leave here, Paint. Nick wants this watered valley. We small fries can't buck him." Fred Potter limped back into the kitchen.

PAINT SWUNG into the saddle, his mind clashing over two entirely different things—his loyalty for the small ranchers against the ruthless Nick Couvier, whose hired guns were law, and Paint's dream of leaving it all behind to go where he could get art training, and so mix with great painters and their salons.

Here lately, his mind was in such a continual turmoil that Paint wasn't quite sure of what he wanted to do. Besides, there were ever before him the blue eyes of Abby Kane, and always that wistful look on her face. Abby, with her brother Jim Kane, owned the 'Running K'—one of the little spreads menaced by the big 'Flying Arrow', Nick Couvier's layout.

Paint drifted toward the hills, and his mind kept going over these things —how his mother used to talk of the glory of becoming a great painter and meeting distinguished people, fine ladies, travel. Ranch life was dull with only a weekly trip on the buckboard to Mesa Flats, the fringe of civilization.

His pinto raised its head with a snort as if glad of the morning, and Paint gulped the clean air of the range, air pungent with sage and other desert odors. Dark moving spots in the color-washed distance were the small herds of the poorer ranchers. He heard the distant bawling, and saw the spume of dust from a line rider's horse. Nearing the Kane spread he heard a cowboy's song from the bunkhouse, and the wood smoke straight up from the terra-cotta chimney was sweet in his nostrils. Again the fanned conflict in his mind. Did he want to give all this up?

And then he saw Abby Kane riding from the corral. She was slender and relaxed in the saddle, a flowing part of the dun that carried her. The low sun glowed on her light curls beneath her cream felt hat, jeans were tight on her legs, low boots in the stirrups. "Howdy, Paint," Abby greeted when she reached the road.

"Morning, Abby," he responded. "Now where are you aiming to go so early?"

Her laugh was a tinkle mingling with the bird chatter in the cottonwoods. "With you!" Her eyes swept the horizon. "When I peeped out and saw this painted heaven, I figured you'd be heading for the hills."

"Guess I belong at the ranch, helping Dad," Paint said reflectively.

Abby hunched her shoulders partly bared by her orange blouse, and that wistful look he knew so well replaced the smile on her lips. "I guess nothing will ever take the place of your paints... Well, I'm going along to see you at work; maybe I can learn why you are ready to give up everything for it."

Paint was slow to answer, himself thinking the same way as he looked at this girl riding stirrup to stirrup with him, her presence adding further turmoil to his wavering mind. "You can't learn how I feel by just watching me."

OFF TOWARD the meadow a team pulled a wagon over the range; Paint reined in and strained his eyes to make out what it carried. "Wire?" he asked incredulously.

"Barbed wire," Abby replied. She said no more until Paint stared questionably, then she added, "We're wiring in the meadow for alfalfa. No sense fattening cattle all summer on grass, then having them lose weight eating snow in winter. We're trying it out."

"But a fence—!"

"I know, Paint; cattle range, open grass by Nick Couvier's gun law. By government law, the land belongs to

my brother and me; we're going to fight for it."

"Start a range war?"

Abby didn't answer his question directly. "Nick Couvier drives his beef right through our meadow to the pens at Mesa Flats. Our alfalfa would be ground into the dirt."

"Your fence won't stop Nick Couvier."

Abby Kane's lips tightened as she looked at him steadily without speaking. Paint knew what was crossing her mind, and he felt the challenge—the threat that this lone girl was ready to face, while he rode the hills to paint pictures. Abby must have sensed his thoughts, and she must have known it would inflame him further: but she couldn't resist saying, "Shall we ride, before your painted heaven fades?"

Paint urged his pony forward and kept his eyes on the road, not wanting her to notice the flush he felt on his face. There was a sting in her tone even though she might have no thought of hurting him, but it stirred an eddying within him.

At the 'Notch' Paint set up his easel. It was a rugged rock plateau part way down the mountainside, an old crater forming a water basin fed by a stream terminating in a waterfall that plunged into the cavity. The overflow of the basin ran into the valley where the 'Crown' ranch was located.

Higher up the basin wall was the 'Notch', an opening through which a lesser flow of water ran in the other direction when the mountain stream was at flood stage. This secondary outlet found its way onto the 'Flying Arrow', a limited supply of water that inflamed the wrath of Nick Couvier.

They staked out their horses and Paint got set up before his easel, eagerness fanning the fire of creation. A miniature canvas comprised his work. "Just a little painting, huh?" Abby said.

Paint nodded. "Field work; back at the ranch I copy this onto a large canvas. Some painters work that way."

Abby watched Paint at his work, she saw how absorbed he became, how the existence of anything else seemed far from his life. It was at such a time that she felt the emptiness deep in her heart. At the ranch Paint was the cowboy, the man she knew, a person like herself, a kindred spirit with a bronc or a lariat.

The Paint at the easel was a stranger far from her reach, a man in another world she knew nothing about, and that wasn't the way Abby dreamed of life to be. As she watched him trying to blend his colors she was aware of the seething in his soul. The picture wasn't as he saw it, and the frustration angered him.

He threw down his brush. "No good!" Paint exclaimed, and his voice had a tone of fury. "I need training! I need help from a master, and I can't get it here."

"No, Paint, you can't get it here," Abby repeated measuredly, and that wistful look came to her features.

Paint knew what was troubling her, and he fought the impulse to take her in his arms—to forget that anything else mattered, even his painting, anything else except her. Instead he said, "Let's get back to the ranch."

THEY RODE in silence until Abby, her glance sweeping the now clear sky, said, "Our painted heaven has faded."

The way she said it hit Paint hard. It had a double meaning. He knew there had long existed a mute understanding between them, an attachment reaching back to kid days when they had ridden the range stirrup to stirrup as they now rode, but before this drive to paint had become a fire within him.

They skirted the meadow where Jim Kane and the 'Running K' hands were stringing the barbed wire, the planned alfalfa section that would compel Nick Couvier to detour into the higher pass

to run his beef to Mesa Flats—or would it stop him?

The ring of the dinner triangle floated up the slope to Paint's ears as they topped the rise. It was another familiar sound ot the range, a musical note of the life he knew, a piece of the patchwork of contentment, something that belonged to him, something he would miss if he left it all for this gnawing urge to paint.

The smile was back on Abby's face and her blue eyes reminded Paint of the few pansies his mother used to grow, and Abby's hair tumbling from her hat on its thong, made him see again those jonquils long since gone from outside the patio wall at the 'Crown'. The triangle was still ringing as they descended the grade to the 'Running K' in the valley and Abby said, "Paint, you're going to eat with me today."

"Okay, Abby."

Paint relieved his pony of the pack containing his painting equipment and reverently handled the small picture, still wet, which he had made at the 'Notch'. He propped it in the corral corner and stood gazing at his work, and again Abby knew how far this man was from her at the moment. She took his arm. "Let's tackle Ah Lee's cooking."

Alone in the kitchen with Paint, Abby felt that they were closer than they had been all the morning at his easel. Jim Kane and the hands were out at the chuck wagon while stringing the wire around the meadow. Paint felt a glowing warmth, a contentment as he looked steadily at Abby across the table, and wondered how it would be without her.

Through the open kitchen doorway Paint saw two riders coming into the yard. They stopped near the corral corner where Paint had left his gear. "Nick Couvier—and his foreman, Lance Streeter," Abby said, and left the kitchen. Paint followed her into the yard, and to where the two men sat arrogantly in their saddles.

NICK COUVIER looked as solid and weighty as the big bay he straddled. His thick short neck exposed by his plaid shirt was granular and red, and his face hard and shiny like the top corral rail polished by cowhand denims. Big chested and fat lipped his voice was a snarl at Abby, "In case your brother might think you'd be scared, I'm telling you what maybe he won't. That barb wire ain't going to make me change my trail when my beef moves. Thought you better hear it direct like, from me."

Abby Kane straightened defiantly. "It's within our rights to fence off our property!"

Nick Couvier leaned forward, his hands clasped over the pommel. "Flying Arrow' run cattle over this grass 'fore you and your brother drifted in with your two-bit outfit. No barb wire and alfalfy patch is going to stop me. I'm still law in these parts; I'm warnin' you!"

Abby stood without flinching. Paint was close beside her. He knew he was facing a challenge that applied equally to him, to his father, to all the small ranchers in Mesa Valley. It made Paint realize there were issues here to be settled, issues far from his paints, the lifeblood of good folks against the power of Nick Couvier and his hired gun hands.

Lance Streeter had not mouthed a word yet. He had been looking curiously at the picture propped in the corral corner, the small painting of the 'Notch'. Streeter was a long-faced man with a stubby beard making his face appear even longer, and his lips were the twisting sarcastic type. Using his sixgun as a pointer, a practice whenever he talked, Streeter said, "Ain't that *purty;* look boss, a *pitchure* of the 'Notch'." Streeter turned toward Paint. "Now imagine a big he-man playing around *thataway.*"

Nick Couvier's eyes turned scornfully on the painting. The 'Notch' had ever

been a sore spot that wrankled Couvier's innards. Many times he had cursed nature's architecture in placing the 'Notch' at a high level so that only flood water flowed through the aperture

"Yep, it's a plumb *purty pitchure,*" Streeter said again, and pulled the trigger of his sixgun. The slug passed through the painting into the corral post. Streeter grinned.

Paint felt the searing flush of anger that went through his blood, and instinctively his hand lowered toward his .45. Abby saw Paint's movement and grasped his arm. Paint left his weapon in its holster, realizing none too soon his hopeless move with Streeter's gun already in the clear.

Streeter's grin broadened. "Now why didn't you leave him try his play, ma'am. Or maybe he ought to slap me with his paint brush."

Nick Couvier turned on his foreman. "Put up that iron, Nick; I'll make the plays around here—understand?"

Streeter obeyed with a dog reverence for his boss. Nick Couvier looked at the bullet-ruined picture, and a faint smile hung on his thick lips. "Got an idea. Lance," he said to his foreman... "Yeah, got an idea. I'll tell you about it." He reined his horse around, Streeter followed, and they rode from the yard.

IT WAS LATE that day when Paint got back at the 'Crown' ranch. His father had gone in to Mesa Flats so he couldn't tell him about Nick Couvier's threat at the 'Running K'. Paint went to bed early that night and early in the morning he rode to the hills. Abby Kane was at the Crown ranch when he got back. "I was waiting for you again when I saw the painted heaven this morning," she said. "When you didn't come I rode here."

"I went in the opposite direction this morning," he replied, and got out two small paintings he had made. They went into the den where the walls displayed his work. Paint talked of nothing else, and Abby knew his paintings were a rival she could never conquer. Resentment made her forget herself. "What good is it all?" she snapped.

Paint looked at her with amazed eyes, his face showing the hurt. "Why, Abby—it's my life."

Abby softened. "I know, and I guess you can't be different." She went out to the patio hitchrail, got on her horse and rode away. Paint watched her disappear and wondered what was wrong with her.

Old Fred Potter rode up while Paint was standing there. He looked strained and tired out as he limped to a deck chair and dropped into it. "Nick Couvier was here yesterday while you were away," Paint's father said. "He told me I'd better take the offer he made for the 'Crown'; he wants this valley deal while I still got water from the 'Notch'."

Paint said, "Why, we've always had water from the 'Notch'."

Old Fred nodded. "I suppose Nick means the drought; if it keeps up he won't have a drop on his side; and I didn't like what he said about his cattle never going dry if water was anywhere, on anybody's land."

"We have our legal rights."

Fred fanned out with his open hand. "Gun rights is all Nick Couvier knows."

Paint got one of his smaller paintings and set it up before a larger canvas and started to work. Fred dozed while Paint was absorbed with his colors. After an hour Paint pushed back his stool. The scraping on the flagstone floor awakened his father. Fred blinked and looked at the fresh canvas. "As I often said, Paint, you're like your mother, always wantin' to daub with brushes. Don't let anything stop you."

The old man got up and went into the kitchen, and at that moment a wave of indecision passed over Paint as he looked out over the open country and saw the long desert shadows of the

mesquite changing to purple in the late of day.

His mind dwelled on the struggling ranchers out there. He thought of the blasted hopes of his father. He visioned Abby Kane braving it alone, and he thought of the way she had left him, resentment causing her to scorn his paintings. He looked at the canvas he had just finished, and a heaviness lowered upon him. He wasn't sure that he wanted to give up the ranch and everything it meant to him.

BUT THE next morning when those elusive colors glorified the horizon Paint was strapping his equipment on his pony when his father joined him at the corral. "Where you headin' for this morning?" Old Fred asked.

"To the 'Notch'," Paint answered, and thought of the ruined sketch from Lance Streeter's bullet at the Running K, an incident he hadn't mentioned to his father.

"I'll ride with you," Fred said, and took down his saddle. "I want to have a look at that water supply out there."

Riding gradually up the grade toward the 'Notch' Paint felt an uneasiness, a premonition, a fear he couldn't place and it made him anxious about his father. Maybe it was the way he sat his saddle, no longer free and relaxed. It gave Paint a strange feeling as if this might be their last ride together.

"Way behind on rainfall," the old man said as their horses left a powdery dust behind them. "Nick Couvier will be plumb dry on his side of the 'Notch'."

The trail became rockier, the horses' shoes striking with a steel ring as they approached the defile. The notched barrier was a brilliant red in the morning sun, a contrast to the vivid blue of the zenith and its mirrored mauve in the basin seeping off into the valley. They rode on in silence until Old Fred in the lead stopped his horse in the jaw of the 'Notch'.

It was then that Paint saw the two men on foot scurrying down the northern slope of the defile where no water trickled onto the 'Flying Arrow'. One of the pair turned and shouted back, "Get out of there quick, you fool!"

At that moment a deep and ominous rumbling started, while a current of air seemed to twist like a cyclone, and the earth trembled beneath their feet and the floor of the defile thrust upward with an explosion that rocked the walls, the sound reverberating through the canyon.

Paint held tautly to the reins as his horse reared and turned and pawed the air and snorted with fear. The animal's front hoofs came down hard and it plunged away from the basin. A showers of rocks screeched upward and then settled, clattering like striking meteors.

There was a stinging odor amid the dust of the atmosphere as the earth quieted. Paint heard the echo of departing hoofs down the canyon. Dismounting, he ran back to where a newborn trickle flowed over an artificial brink. He found his father where Fred's horse had gone down under the crushing weight of rock. Old Fred lay there, pain twisting his features. He gasped, "Nick Couvier—dynamite!"

Paint pushed and pried the rock from his father's body and dragged him into the clear. Fred sank unconscious when Paint tried to get him on his feet. He threw away his easel, paints, everything from his own pinto and finally got his father lashed on the horse's back. Paint looked off toward the valley, a long trek to lead the horse with its burden back to the ranch...

OLD FRED POTTER survived the frontier surgery, the amputation of his crushed leg, but a week later Doc Aronson beckoned Paint into the den, the long gallery where his paintings were on the wall. Abby Kane was there, she had been at the 'Crown' sine the disaster at the 'Notch'. She had nursed the 'Crown' owner, and had tried to bolster Paint's spirits.

Doc Aronson said, "You might as

well know it, Paint. Old Fred is passing on; the shock was too much for his heart. He may go any day."

Paint stared and made no reply. Abby swallowed a lump in her throat. Doc Aronson's glance took in the painting, and Paint felt the tinge of censure in the medico's voice when he said, "Guess taking over the ranch will keep you away from all this." He gripped his bag and left the ranchouse.

Fred's voice reached them from the bedroom, and Paint and Abby went in by his side. "I know what that old sawbones told you, son. I'm going out, and I knew it before he did. Now listen to me, my last wishes. I want you to keep on with that painting! It will be the first thing she'll ask me when I meet your mother again."

Fred stopped speaking and breathed heavily before he went on, "Quit the 'Crown', Paint. You won't get anywhere here; and every day of your life you'll regret not doing what's in your heart. Besides, you're not the kind to buck Nick Couvier's guns."

Paint felt the rage boiling up within him. Nick Couvier in his futile attempt to divert the stream onto the 'Flying Arrow' had murdered his father. He had to kill this man!

Fred turned to Abby. "You see to it that Paint gets out of here. He's different blood and don't belong. Promise, Abby?"

Abby blinked from the moisture in her eyes. The dying man was asking her to pledge away the life, the happiness of which she had dreamed with Paint. That was the way it was to be. She nodded. "It's his painted heaven. I'll help him reach it..."

A WEEK LATER Old Fred Potter passed on. Paint threw himself into the chores of the ranch. He accompanied the few remaining hands out on the roundup. He gathered strays from hidden draws and ate at the chuck wagon and slept out under the canopy of stars, and all the time the debate was in his mind—this life or somewhere distant as his father had urged.

Just after the depleted herd of 'Crown' cows got on the trail to Mesa Flats, Abby Kane rode into the 'Crown' ranch yard and ground reined her pony. She was walking fast toward the patio when Paint got up from his chair to meet her. "My brother is dead!" she said tersely.

"Abby, no—!"

"Yes, from a 'Flying Arrow' bullet when he tried to hold back their cows. They trod our alfalfa meadow flat." Abby sank into a chair, sobs jerking her body when she buried her face in her arm.

This time Paint spoke aloud. "I've got to kill Nick Couvier!"

Abby sprang to her feet. "Don't be a fool! I'll carry on alone at the Running K. They won't shoot a woman; this is my fight!"

"And mine, Abby, they killed my Dad."

She put her hands on his shoulders. "Paint, listen, I promised your father I'd get you away from this country, to a new world where you belong."

"All that can wait."

"You've got to go, now, before—"

"No!"

He hurried to the far end of the gallery and took down his holstered sixgun from a peg. He buckled on the belt, rotated the chamber of the weapon, and ran his fingers over the cartridges in the loops. He strode out of the house and toward the corral, Abby at his heels. "Paint, where are you going?"

"To Mesa Flats. Nick Couvier and the 'Flying Arrow' bunch hang out there after the drive."

She grasped his arm. "You can't, Paint; you can't do it. Your father wouldn't want it that way, your mother wouldn't. He'll get you the way he got Jim!"

I've got to go, Abby."

She ran back to the patio for her own horse and joined him stirrup to stirrup as they left the corral, this time not for the peaceful pursuit of paint-

ing, but for another pursuit, the pursuit of a man who was a killer...

IT WAS LATE afternoon when they rode into Mesa Flats, already stirred to activity by the 'Flying Arrow' men celebrating in the five saloons. Paint's eyes shifted from side to side as their ponies cantered along the dust-powdered street. He saw the 'Flying Arrow' brand on the horses at the hitch-rail of the *Roaring Steer Bar*. Paint hesitated a moment, then went on to Lowry's Mercantile where there was room at the rail.

Paint and Abby swung down from their saddles. They fastened their horses. Town Marshal Ballard was up on the plank walk. He sized up Paint's strained face and the low-hung sixgun. "What you aimin' to do in town, Paint?"

Paint didn't answer, he kept his eyes on the 'Roaring Steer' and took a step in that direction. Abby held on to his arm. He shook himself free. "Stay here, Abby."

Abby stepped up onto the planked walk, close to the marshal as Paint cut diagonally across the street. "Ca—can't you do something, Marshal Ballard?"

"About what?"

"They'll kill Paint!"

Ballard let loose with tobacco juice. "Seems like Paint's walking plumb into it."

"You can stop it, you can arrest Nick Couvier!"

"Nick ain't broke no law."

At that moment the *Roaring Steer* batwings swung out and Nick Couvier came onto the walk. Lance Streeter was beside him. Their faces turned hard when they saw Paint Potter coming toward them, halfway across the street. The two 'Flying Arrow' men stepped down into the roadway. The scowl on Nick Couvier's face changed to a grin as Paint neared. "Look. Lance; here's our paintin' friend."

"Now so it is, and where's his *purty pitchures* today? I need some more shootin' practice."

"You know, Lance, looks like something else is on his mind."

Nick Couvier abruptly stopped his banter and the scowl again darkened his coarse features. The long-faced Streeter hooked his thumbs in his cartridge belt. Couvier said, "Don't lower your hand toward that gun you're toting, Potter, or I might have to protect myself like I did with Jim Kane."

Nick Couvier straightened with the arrogance that made him the threat of the rangeland. He spoke again, "No two-bit alfalfy outfit is blocking my trail, and now I'm telling you what I said to your old man. As long as there's water I'll get it if I have to blast the mountain apart!"

Paint spoke for the first time. "I'm here to settle that argument, Nick, right now."

Couvier stared, amazement in his piercing eyes. This courage was unexpected; it was something his dominant nature couldn't understand. This paint-daubing youth couldn't stand there alone in cold opposition to him. Didn't the young upstart realize he was facing sure death? It made Nick Couvier mad all over as Paint held his ground; and then a strange feeling crept over Couvier—some concern that unnerved him and made him feel edgey as no slick gunhawk had ever made him feel. The kid had guts.

IT WAS A different struggle that was tearing at Paint's heart, this moment of his life when he must prove his heritage, when he must not flinch as old Fred Potter had not flinched under the agony of crude surgery with only whiskey as an anesthetic.

Paint had eyes that saw all details as other eyes did not see things. They were eyes like his mother's that saw color where others saw only drab hues, eyes that saw the slight movement of the rangeland grass when there was no breeze, the swaying of the gnarled mesquite when the wind howled, the first fear of the disturbed birds taking to

flight from under the desert creosote.

And now those same eyes were his hope in another way; they saw that almost imperceptible movement, that fractional part of an inch rise to Nick Couvier's right shoulder, and Paint knew what was to follow. It was then that Paint made his play—a flashing draw—and his leveled sixgun spoke a scant instant before the 'Flying Arrow' boss' weapon got far from leather.

Paint saw the unbelieving eyes that stared blankly at him, the incredible look on Nick Couvier's face as the heavy man sank to the roadway. A nausea washed through Paint's stomach; it made him shake in every nerve. His gun hand dropped weightily, and Paint realized too late that his involuntary move meant his end.

Lance Streeter's gun was rising, it was almost level with his heart!

But it wasn't his end; and as the report reached his ears Paint saw Streeter go down beside the boss he had worshiped. Paint turned toward Lowry's Mercantile where Abby Kane held the gun she had snatched from Marshal Ballard's holster. She had fired the shot that saved him from Streeter's bullet.

Ballard grasped the gun from Abby, ran into the street and faced the men pouring from the *Roaring Steer*. The town marshal now held two guns. "Okay, boys, don't go for your hardware. It was a fair fight, and it's over..."

It was late that night, the moon silvering the range sweet with the desert odors on the gentle breeze. Abby's voice was a murmur, "It's over, Paint. There will be peace here now; you can leave to follow what's in your heart."

Paint held her closely. "I remember your promise to Dad—that you'd help me find my *Painted Heaven*. I've found it, Abby. It's here, with you. It could never be in another place... I can paint here, too, Abby; I can paint what I see, as well as I can, and that'll be good enough for me."

★

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THE CACTUS FLASH

by Edward Garner

The Cactus Flash was a trifle rash,
And he feared neither friend nor foe.
He was never mild, and always wild,
He reaped where he did not sow.
He was not to blame for the awful shame
That fell to his lot, when he
In a manner brash did eat the hash
Of the chuck wagon's Wun Sing Lee.

The Flash was tired, and a long ride sired
A hunger for spuds and steak,
And he sought his due at the Bar O-2,
An ease for his hunger's ache.
He rode around until he found,
As he searched in a manner brash,
The cookhouse where, upon the air,
Lay the smell of a strange, strange hash.

The Flash was riled, but reconciled
To the hash of Wun Sing's meal,
Though he found the bones and a few pine cones
Were lacking in taste appeal.
He did not flinch when he found an inch
Of a meat that he thought was owl,
But it made him see that Wun Sing Lee
Would have to be made to howl.

When the Flash was through there was work to do
Work he would do with a will,
That he might show by a mighty blow
What he thought of the fearful swill.
But Wun Sing pranced, not at all entranced
By the prospect that lay before,
And turned and ran in a master plan
To live and to cook some more.

The Flash was rude, and so pursued
The form of the flying Lee,
But he soon turned pale and began to fail,
And fell down in agony.
He writhed and moaned, and he tossed and groaned,
And the men who found him agree
That his last words were, "Don't eat the hash
From the cookhouse of Wun Sing Lee!"

The kid they called "Drifty" had some important

DEBTS TO SQUARE

by Cleve Curran

"BANDITS don't make plans as crudely as that," Ed Fallon said in his heavy voice that was rife with disbelief and overtones of sardonic amusement. "I was a child myself, once, and also was prone to stir up a vivid imagination."

"But I heard them Big Ed— I mean Mr. Fallon— I heard them talkin' of takin' over your herd," the thin-faced youngster said firmly. "I was sleepin' under the ledge of a gulley when I heard these rustlers on top of the gulley point out just what cattle they were bent on rustlin' tonight." The boy's face was tense and far too old for his fourteen years.

Ed Fallon rolled a quirly in thick fingers and moved his heavy bulk in the chair. The chair creaked protestingly.

"I believe they call you, Drifty, don't they"; he said impressively. "I've seen you around."

A brief flicker of surprise crossed the youngster's face. Who hadn't seen him around? Who in Bennett didn't know him as a homeless waif who uncomplimentarily was referred to as Drifty? It was a distasteful name which is probably what the townspeople intended it should be. It was an affront and a stigma all rolled into two words.

Fallon abruptly leaned forward and pointed his cigaret at the youngster. "You should be the last person—the very last—to make such an accusation. After all your—er—background isn't so good. Nobody should believe you, especially when you mention cattle rustling."

Drifty's throat bulged and he seemed to swallow a hard knot that came from the very heart itself.

Fallon's meaning was only too painfully clear. It had been four years since the kid, from a distance, had seen a posse that included Big Ed Fallon, hold a lynching bee that had left the kid's father and three other confessed rustlers swinging grotesquely from the limb of a cottonwood tree.

The kid had remained in Bennett for no other reason save that in his heart he felt assured that some member of his family would be able to clear his name. It had not been easy, taking whatever odd jobs a kid could fill, sleeping and eating as best he could, and trying to stare down the unspoken taunts so near the surface in the hard glances tossed his way.

He was not large enough for a regular cowpoke job, and lacked a saddle to call his own. And if he had been in the market for regular employment it would have been necessary to see Big Ed Fallon, who owned and operated the largest cooperative ranch on the whole of the mesa.

Now he had told Big Ed that the choicest lot of his and other ranchers' steers on Big Ed's ranch was to be rustled.

And Big Ed did not believe him—simply because his name was Drifty, and his father had been caught throw-

ing a long loop. Just why the whole town should think he was cut from the same stripe as his Dad, and just a natural nominee for a noose, was hard to understand.

BIG ED was watching the kid intently.

"Of course if there was some rustling on my spread," Big Ed growled, "it would have to be somebody who knew the layout—like some former employee—like Chuck Reynolds."

The kid clutched his battered hat in his hands and found himself twisting the hat into a corded rope.

"Why Chuck wouldn't do a thing like that," the kid said hoarsely. "He's doing all right on that little spread he bought for himself. He wasn't among the men I heard talking."

"Hum-m," Big Ed said, writing rapidly, "that may be so. For a guy who is hardly better than a squatter Chuck Reynolds is coming up mighty fast. Yes—mighty fast."

The kid knew this was not so. In all of the mesa he could depend only upon one man—and that man was Chuck Reynolds. When matters became too tough—pride permitted—the kid always was sure of a welcome at Reynolds'. He could flop on a cot and always fill his thin belly until pride drove him into the hills or the town again. He never stayed long. He couldn't impose on Reynolds, for Reynolds had so little. An extra mouth to feed, in Reynolds' condition, was a hardship. Of that the kid was sure.

"Big Ed," the kid said in a sudden fury of utter futility, "you're as wrong as a nine dollar bill!" He turned abruptly on his heel and started for the door of the land office.

"Hold on there, younker," Big Ed said, and he was on his feet and smiling. "My foreman is up at the saloon. Give him this note. You're working for me now. He'll fix you up."

The kid suddenly was wary. The hairs on the nape of his neck crawled ominously.

"Why?" The kid asked in suspicion. A cowpoke without a saddle—and only fourteen—usually was not taken on—especially by a tight-fisted man like Big Ed.

Fallon laid a fatherly hand on the kid's shoulder. "Because you've got spunk, Drifty. You're growing up. You'll make a good hand—and I need good hands."

The kid hesitated, then shrugged. After all, a job was a job—and he had to make a start sometime. And being on the ranch when the blowoff came—a blowoff Big Ed refused to believe—would offer protection for an innocent man like Chuck Reynolds. The kid meant to find out for himself the identity of the rustlers. All he knew so far was that he could identify their voices.

"Well," the kid said hesitantly. "Well—just thanks—that's all—thanks." He took and pocketed the proferred letter.

Big Ed chuckled good-naturedly.

AT THE *Last Dollar Saloon* the kid pushed importantly through the swinging doors.

"Get the hell outta here," the bartender bellowed. "We ain't got no work and there's no free grub."

The kid winced inwardly, but continued to walk rapidly across the sawdust-covered floor. After all, wasn't he a man with a job now and entitled to go into and do what he so desired? He was, he told himself, and strode up to Kennedy, the ranch foreman.

"For you," he said, and passed over Big Ed's letter.

Kennedy, bristly-faced and florid, took one look at the letter, reached hastily for the quart of redeye, and downed a neat three-fingers worth.

"Hell!" he said. Then, "Hell and damnation!"

"I didn't ask him for the job," the kid said.

Kennedy turned slowly and looked

down at Drifty. It came to the kid like something in a nightmare that he had seen Kennedy stand stock still before —only he had been looking up and grinning at a slowly-turning body hanging from a taut rope.

"The job part is okay, kid," he said. "I was just cussin' because the boss wants us to go back now. And we still had about four more hours to take on some likker."

That did not ring true, either. It was not payday and Kennedy and his men should have been out on the range. But the kid shrugged and decided to play his string out. After all, when you have nothing there's nothing you can lose....

Kennedy took the kid's arm and led him to the back room. When he opened the door and gently pushed the kid inside four men looked up and the kid saw the snout of a sixshooter braced along the edge of the round table.

The first thought that came to the kid was that these were not local men, and he would have known of any strangers working for Big Ed.

"What's this," a cowpoke said hoarsely. "We don't need no kids around."

"That's right," another said deep in his chest. "What's ailin' yuh, Kennedy?"

Cold fear engulfed the kid. He couldn't be mistaken about those voices. Under the protective covering of the ledge at the gulley he had heard these same voices. There was no possibility of mistake.

He heard Kennedy shut the door, and whirled.

Kennedy was smiling down upon him.

The kid started to say, "Now lookit here, Kennedy, I—" when he heard the vague hissing of slashed air. He tried to turn and duck low. Dimly he saw the glint of a downsweeping sixshooter. Then the world exploded and he felt his knees lurch up and out from under him. Then he knew no more.

* * *

THE PAIN was like a shocking thing as his brain fought for consciousness. Each effort was like shooting rockets that burned like branding irons.

He tried to move and could not, and then became aware of the softness of a familiar bunk beneath his body. There were familiar odors, too, that were vaguely disconcerting. He turned his head and became aware that he was in a dark cabin. An oblong window pane, frightfully small, told him just whose cabin he was in—Chuck Reynolds'.

An occasional bawling and the sudden movement of hoofs told him cattle were moving restlessly just beyond the limits of the cabin.

A fierce fear possessed him. Reynolds had a few head, but they were in pasture. The movements outside sounded like more than just a few head, like Reynolds might have driven a few strays onto his own land after darkness.

He tried to sit up and found his arms bound and the loops running beneath Reynolds' bunk.

That made it look more damning than ever for Reynolds. Where was Reynolds? And why should he tie the kid up in his own cabin? If he had wanted to make sure the kid did not see the rustling of Big Ed's herd, then Reynolds certainly had succeeded.

He lay still trying to force his spinning head into some semblance of clarity. It was hard to think coherently.

And suddenly it wasn't at all difficult anymore. Above and beyond the slow movement of cattle came the distinct sound of two shots, then a fusillade. There was a period of quiet, followed by another scattering of shots.

The kid thought he had the answer then—and ugly it was even though not a complete answer. He strained at his bonds.

With an utter feeling of surprise he felt them give—give far too easily. He knew that he had been tied with slip-

knots—knots never meant to hold a man for any long period.

And that didn't make sense. Or did it? Such a situation was rife in its implications—none of which seemed to be in the favor of Chuck Reynolds.

He pulled the ropes free and put his felt over the side of the bunk. When he tried to stand his head ached intolerably.

He finally weaved upright and staggered across the cabin and pulled open the door.

There were some longhorns and a few white faces practically parked on Reynolds' doorstop. Whoever had driven them here hadn't bothered to corral them.

The kid weaved on his feet, then returned to the cabin. When he came out he was carrying Reynolds' scattergun and the pockets of his patched pants bulged with shells.

He drove a path through the cattle to the barn, and felt hot blood start to flow again through his matted hair and then chillingly down his neck and back. He felt weak, knew his was weak, knew agonizingly that this was no time to be in either condition. He—a kid—had a big job to do; a job that a well man would have considered unsafe and unwanted.

CHUCK'S HORSE and saddle were gone. But broad and swaybacked Nellie, a chore horse for the wagon and the alfalfa patch, still munched contentedly in her stall. The kid led her outside, pulled himself up upon her back. There was no bit, just a hackamore. The kid beat a tattoo on her sides. Nellie looked up at him in surprise and started to lumber slowly for Big Ed Fallon's huge spread.

The shots had come from up there. Of that the kid felt reasonably sure. What they had portended was anyone's guess.

On a sudden impulse the kid pulled on the hackamore until Nellie reluctantly turned south for an arroyo that led from Big Ed's ranch and then through Lozek Pass in the wilds of the mountains.

It was a long gamble and he realized it, but smart rustlers could not logically take any other route and remain under cover.

The kid cursed and fumed at Nellie, but the full extent of his prodding only induced Nellie to continue a jarring, slow-footed trot. Still, he reasoned, they were moving faster than a herd could be moved.

It was nearing dawn when he heard the faint bawling of cattle. Later he smelled the dust in the air, and thought he detected the jar—like a drum reverberating—of many hoofs in motion.

When it did happen it almost was too easy. The man out on point was the gun-swinging waddy who had opened the kid's skull.

He came around a bend in the canyon and there confronting him was the kid, sighting along the barrel of the scattergun and a foaming Nellie with her head low and blowing hard at the ground. Together the kid and the horse made an unimposing pair. But the gun in the kid's hands was imposing—and deadly.

"Don't reach, you hombre," the kid said, as the rider's hand moved slowly downward to his holstered gun.

The right hand came slowly upward, the left was taut on the reins.

"Come in closer," the kid clipped. "And keep that right hand up."

The rider hesitated, then walked his horse slowly forward, with only his eyes making furtive movements.

Without warning the kid jammed the muzzle into the rider's face, bringing a howl of pain. As the rider's head bent the kid reversed the gun and brought the butt down hard on the waddy's skull.

The man slipped soundlessly from his saddle and to the ground.

He hauled the man to the side of the canyon and bound him with his own lariat. Then the kid swung aboard the rider's horse, gave Nellie an affection-

ate rap on her rump to start her home, and turned to climb the hills of the canyon.

He pulled up behind a clump of boulders and looked down. Almost a thousand head were making the turn in the canyon—sleek, white-faced steers mostly, a huge endeavor of the cooperative ranch. The kid hazarded the guess that only a few were the actual property of Big Ed, the rest belonging to ranchers who leased his broad acres and his studs. It was a nice haul—a sweet setup.

There were two riders, "Hawing" at the herd, using their ropes as sharp-cracking whips. They were pushing the cattle hard.

The kid's first shot echoed and reechoed through the canyon. It was deliberately high.

The riders pulled up and wheeled their horses uncertainly. The tail end of the herd shoved forward and tried to break into a run but were blocked off.

Behind his boulder the kid called: "Drop your guns, hombres. You're surrounded."

One rider made a desperate grab at his holster. The kid's scattergun made him pitch sideways and face down in the dust.

That convinced the second. He reached cautiously for his gun and dropped it.

The kid rode down the slope while the rider sat his sorrel in goggle-eyed amazement.

The rest was simple. The kid turned the herd with a fusillade of shots and yells. When the herd had started on its return to Big Ed's the kid swung to the far side on it with his two prisoners bound to each other atop the sorrel.

* * *

THE HANGING that morning would have been an epic one. The oldest inhabitant admitted it. When, the kid on his horse and leading the laboring horse carrying the two captives turning into the square, Chuck Reynolds already was up on the scaffold, a rope around his neck.

The sheriff was on the platform, seeing to it that the knot under Reynolds' ear was secure and properly placed to snap his neck.

And Big Ed Fallon and the foreman, Kennedy, were standing before the platform looking up with a look the kid remembered. Only the other time it had not been an innocent man up there.

But Chuck Reynolds was innocent.

"We caught him bare-handed," Big Ed was telling the crowd over and over again. "He already had the cattle on his ranch when we caught up to him. When we tried to take him he even threw a few shots at us. The cattle are still there, as proof."

"But what about Drifty?" Reynolds said huskily. "You said I captured him, was holding him prisoner, because he knew of the raid on your herd? Where is he if I harmed him?"

"We have proof he was tied-up in your cabin, with loose knots so that he could escape," Kennedy spat. "It's easy to read sign."

"It shore is," the kid said from the outskirts of the crowd. He sat his horse easily, the scattergun across his knees.

"Hell and damnation," Kennedy said. "It's the kid!"

"Seize him, sheriff," Big Ed yelled. "We can have a double hanging now."

"Put down the gun, kid," the sheriff said evenly. "You got some explaining to do."

The kid pushed back his hat and said: "I reckon I have." He did not discard the gun. He was staring at Kennedy and Big Ed.

There was something in his demeanor, his utter confidence in himself, and the sight of the two prisoners trussed aboard the sorrel that was convincing.

"Say your piece," the sheriff said.

"I know from talking to these hombres," the kid said indicating his prison-

ers. "I guessed most of it, but they proved me right."

"He's a damned liar!" one prisoner said.

The kid reversed his gun and raised it.

The second prisoner screamed: "Don't hit me again!" Then to the sheriff and the crowd: "He's tellin' you the McCoy."

LOOKING at the sheriff, the kid watched Big Ed and Kennedy start to draw back into the crowd.

"Reynolds is my friend," the kid said levelly. "When the rustlers found out that I knew of their raid they decided to make Reynolds the fall guy 'cause I'd be a perfect stooge for him. They drove away fifty head into his place, and he came out to find out what the rumpus was about. There was some shooting, and Reynolds—being innocent—surrendered.

"The rustlers had slugged me. When they grabbed Reynolds they took me to his cabin and tied me up loose."

"Why?" someone in the crowd asked.

"That's easy. If I rushed out to help Reynolds, I'd been held as a rustler, too. If I'd 'a' been afraid and run for it, Reynolds would have been hung and people would have been saying of me 'He was just like his dad.' Only I didn't run for it. I went out and got the real rustlers and turned the herd back for home. They're cattle that belongs to most of you small ranchers. Big Ed naturally had to lose a few of his own to make the thing look good, but he couldn't be held responsible for the much bigger loss you small ranchers with leases with him would suffer."

"What herd?" the sheriff rasped.

"What the rustlers really were after —the big herd," the kid said, shifting his gun near his shoulder. "All this excitement over Reynolds and fifty mangy critters was just a smoke screen. You people were getting so busy trying and hanging Reynolds that the real herd was getting away."

The sheriff turned suddenly and looked hard at the spot were Big Ed Fallon had been standing.

"What have you got to say—" he started, then broke off.

The kid's gun came up to his shoulder. He saw the faces of two men looking up at a cord strung from a cottonwood tree. The gun spoke twice and two big men preparing to mount horses near the rack at the side of the jail clutched riddled shoulders. Big Ed fell blubbering to the ground. Kennedy looked contemptuously down at him, and spat.

"Your answer," the kid said. "Trying to get away would have been guilt enough, but they'll talk, and so will these two men." He motioned to his two prisoners. "Now don't you think it's about time to get that rope from around Reynolds' neck?"

The crowd roared its assent. And Drifty knew his name would be clear now.

★

2 *GRIPPING NOVELETS OF MIDNIGHT MYSTERY*

OH, MURDER MINE! **by H. C. Butler**

THE HOLE IN THE FRAME **by Hamilton Craigie**

lead off the all-star April issue of

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

BADLANDS JUSTICE

Sheriff Cass Markam didn't intend to let Nance ride this trail after a killer alone. But it was necessary that she appear to be alone...

by DEV KLAPP

THE GRAY figure of a coyote slunk shadow-like down the side of a shallow draw that ran through the center of the Coshatta Badlands. It stopped suddenly, swerved to the right and disappeared into the surrounding scrub growth as two riders dropped from a limestone bench and headed for Pop Tebbel's shack.

A girl in levis and plaid shirt rode one of the approaching horses. She was slender and dark-eyed, but her hair was the golden brown of range grass in the fall.

"I hope Pop isn't running his trap lines," she said to the man at her side; "I want to surprise him."

The man said nothing, but there was a frown on his dark, young face as they pulled up beyond a boulder that jutted out into the dry stream bed. Before them the draw levelled off onto a rocky plateau, in the center of which sat Pop Tebbel's one-room adobe shack.

The girl, Nance, turned a sober face to her silent companion. "Wait for me here, Pete, I'll only be a minute." Then she added regretfully. "Gosh, I wish you and Pop got along better."

She touched a spur to the flank of her pinto and headed toward the weather-beaten hut. Dismounting, she dropped the reins and eased open the door, disappearing within. There was silence, then a scream, loud and high.

Pete Darringer spurred for the house. When he flung the door open, Nance hurled herself into his arms, weeping. "Oh, Pete! It's Pop! He's dead!" she cried hysterically, "somebody killed him!"

Pop Tebbel lay on the floor of the small room, as if he had been dragged from the bunk in the corner.

"Look!" Nance cried, "He's been robbed, too!"

The bricks from the hearth had been pulled from their setting and a gutted canvas money-bag lay on the hard-packed dirt floor. Drawers had been pulled out and a sturdy chest pried open before the intruder succeeded in finding Pop's savings.

SHERIFF CASS MARKAM leaned back comfortably in a new swivel

chair behind a battered old desk. His hairy hands were crossed over an ample midriff. There was sympathy in his black eyes as he regarded Nance sitting stiffly before him.

"But not Pete, Mr. Markam! It couldn't be!" she exclaimed in a horrified whisper.

Sheriff Markam shook his head. Light from a dusty window behind him played across his gray hair and touched the ends of his mustache. "The evidence I've found seems to say clearly that Pete killed your pa," he told her gently. "So you see, gal, I had to lock him up."

Markam's sun-tanned face showed regret. He had known Nance and her father for many years. When Pop Tebbel sent Nance to school in town, Cass and his wife watched over the trapper's daughter as if she were their own. Still, even though it might hurt Nance, Cass was not a man to let personal feelings interfere with his duty.

"It's hard for you, Honey, to think that Pete might have killed your pa," he sympathized; "but you know yourself Pete's sort of wild and his friends ain't so good."

Cass watched the girl as he spoke. After a moment he added: "Some of Pop's savings were found in the boy's pockets when we picked him up—gold coins with the testing tooth-marks so peculiar to old Pop. So you can see it looks bad for Pete, can't you, gal?"

"But Mr. Markam," Nance recalled, "Pete was with me when we found Pop." The shock of the discovery was still raw in her mind.

"Sure, but think! Your pa had been dead a long while", the sheriff reminded her, "and Pete knows his way around the badlands. Such a trip could be made both ways in two hours by a fast rider."

Nance nodded reluctantly. "How did Pete account for the money, Mr. Markam?"

"He shut up tight as an Injun when I asked him, Nance."

"Couldn't it be that he got them from *his* pa?" Nance questioned, "You know how Pop and Mr. Darringer never got along!"

A slight smile riffled the sheriff's mustache. "Have you ever known that stingy old coot to give his boy so much as a thin dime? He always let on as how money was bad for a kid.

"But you could at least question him," Nance persisted.

Sheriff Markam swung upright with a protesting screech from his chair. "Sure, I aim to, honey, when the old varmint comes out of them badlands where he's been for the last two weeks. It won't take long once he hears his boy's in the calaboose, for in spite of his chinchy ways, him and that boy are mighty close."

Cass Markam scribbled idly on the blotter before him. "If I was young," he remarked pointedly, "and filled with prance, I'd go look for the old codger myself!" The sheriff's eyes narrowed, "The badlands ain't so bad for them that knows 'em, eh, Nance?"

Nance nodded thoughtfully. This was a new idea. Then, as though she had suddenly arrived at a decision she turned toward the door and walked out of the office, with no more than a preoccupied gesture of departure toward the sheriff. So she failed to see the slow smile on Markam's face, or the gleam of satisfaction that lighted his eyes.

ALTHOUGH certain that Pete was innocent, Nance was obliged to admit the logic of Cass Markman's reasoning. All Bluff City knew of the enemity that lay like a rattlesnake between the Darringers and Pop Tebbel. Handed down from father to son, it was more of a feud than a quarrel; it was a matter of land, Nance knew—though both the older men were vague as to the original cause, even if you pinned them down. "A dumb way to act!" Nance murmured angrily.

Old Cass Markman was fat and lazy, she told herself. A nice fellow, but he'd sit back in that chair of his like a lump of dobie mud, waiting for the trapper to come to him. Well, she didn't share his confidence that Pete's father wouldn't desert his son. While Markam hung around town, Mr. Darringer could easily cross over into Mexico and lose himself in its jungles, leaving Pete to hang for the murder of her father.

With the sheriff's careless words still in her mind, she began to consider ways of catching Pete's father before he could get away. Nance knew the general direction of the Darringer cabin, and thought she could recognize the shack if she saw it; Pete had mentioned his father's difficulty in growing tall cottonwoods on each side of the hut.

So she headed for the saddle shop across the street to get leather guards for her pinto, to protect him from rocks and possible snake-bite along the trail, and there she found Mel Rance, eyeing her from a box near the door.

Mel was a woman chaser, but he was a coward, too. Nance's lips curled. He knew better than to bother her since the day she popped him one across the face right in the middle of Main Street. She had never told Pete about that.

Rance had pale, wavy hair and pale blue eyes that were long and sly. He did not work and his hands were soft and smooth with tapering fingers—not like Pete's strong, range-hardened ones. He claimed to be a descendant of David Crockett, which Nance doubted, but it gave him a certain local standing, as the little town clung close to its Texas background.

Nance was examining a set of leather leggins for the horse when Rance followed her into the store. "Looks like you are headed for the badlands—or somewhere mighty rough—to buy things like those," he probed. Then he went on spitefully, "Your fellow's holding down the jail, I hear." When Nance set her mouth and said nothing, he added, "Since Pete isn't here, I'd like to ride along with you."

He put a hand on her shoulder intimately. Nance shook it off and her eyes blazed. "When Pete gets out he will fix you plenty, Mel Rance!" she stormed. "In the meantime, stay away from me if you don't want another backhanded lick!"

Rance's pale face reddened darkly, and his mouth twisted to one side. "I'm thinking he'll be out of circulation for some time." Then he concluded in a low voice, "I'll remember that last remark."

Nance gave him a withering glance and hurried from the shop. Outside, Cass Markam stood idly on the board walk. He did not seem to see her and she was glad, for her plan did not include the sheriff's company.

BY NOON, Nance was well into the badlands. She stopped by her father's house first, rested and packed a little kit of biscuits and a small bottle of water. She hadn't bought these emergency items in town for she wanted to keep her errand secret.

Nance had never before been so deep into the rocky wasteland as this, and today it lost its friendly familiarity. The barren land was like home to her, but now she felt uneasy before its silence, its still, hot air. She began to worry about Sliding Canyon, that treacherous stretch of country where, if one did not know his way, the ground might tremble, then slip beneath incautious feet into landslides that plunged into the depths below.

Pete had once mentioned that when his father wanted privacy he generally holed up in their cabin the other side of Sliding Canyon, because no one, unless he knew exactly how to go, could reach him across the dreaded gorge.

It seemed she had ridden for miles. Exhaustion was cramping her muscles and her pinto drooped in the hot, rock-reflected rays of the sun. She stopped

for a moment to get her bearings.

And what, she asked herself scornfully, *am I going to do with Pete's father when I find him? No man in his senses would be led to a waiting noose by a girl who didn't even reach his shoulder, with only the little .22 hand-gun she carried.*

But there was another weapon! If the old man thought enough of his boy, as Cass Markam seemed to think he did, he would listen to her when she told him Pete was in jail—maybe at the mercy of a lynching mob! She didn't want actually to lie, but then there were times when a half-truth came in handy. And she had to bring the old man back!

Her eyes probed the empty distance. There was only a monotonous sameness of rock, cactus, stunted trees and dry stream beds, harboring all the crawling, stalking things that man dreaded. As far as she could see the rocky ground stretched jaggedly before her. The noonday heat weighed her down. Every few yards she pulled her mount to a standstill and searched the skyline for the old man's shack.

Four hours later Nance saw what she was looking for. Small in the distance, two trees stood above the surrounding growth, evenly spaced and startling in their unusual setting. From now on the going was dangerous.

Nance looked about her carefully. She noticed that the ground sloped. This must be the beginning of Sliding Canyon, but the incline was deceptive in its gentleness. Letting the pinto pick its way, Nance watched for the little shack. But the going was slow. So carefully did she pick her way that it was a full two hours before she saw the shack between the tall cottonwoods.

Why, she wondered, hadn't the sheriff or a posse come to bring the old man in? And did the state allow its lawmen to bring in witnesses or suspected people so? Vague suspicions stirred in her mind.

SUDDENLY the shaley hillside dipped into a steeper slope that terminated in a deep gorge. The shack was on the other side. It would be late night when she picked her way across this canyon and knocked on the cabin door.

She searched for some simpler path but saw none. She'd ride a little farther, Nance decided, then dismount and pick her way, step by step, on foot. But, upon rounding a sharp ledge, she pulled to a stop once more. To one side, almost close enough to touch, was one end of a crude suspension bridge, secured by two ropes attached to a six-foot-high chunk of granite, and dipping across the canyon in a gentle arc, to vanish behind a sizable chapparal in front of the little hut.

Nance kneed her mount into motion once more while she studied the frail bridge. This, undoubtedly, was Mr. Darringer's way of transversing the gorge.

She reached out and touched the chunk of granite to which the rope was tied and ran her hand along the line. The ropes were worn and gray with age. She quailed at the thought of trusting herself to such a contraption.

Then, even while she had the thought in mind, there came the rattle of loose stones and her horse gave a lurch. Instinctively, Nance grabbed for rope and clung there. With the strange feeling, she felt her mount sink beneath her; when the animal screamed she knew what had happened.

Grimly she hung to the rope with both hands and swung herself up onto the narrow bridge, while her horse rolled toward the bottom of the canyon with an ever-growing landside gathering momentum as it fell.

Nance cautiously felt her way back along the bridge toward the rock anchor some thirty feet away. Her heart was pounding and she was struggling for breath when her fingers touched the sun-heated stone. Then she carefully

tested the ground before stepping from the weathered boards.

Would she go sliding off toward the chasm suddenly if she let go her hold on the rope? Reason told her that the rock was on solid ground or it wouldn't have been chosen for an anchor. So, with a little catch of breath, she let go the rope. The ground was solid and rocky, but she could see a few feet farther out where the rotted shale had given away beneath her horse's feet. She shuddered at the thought.

The sun was below the skyline now, and across the gulch the adobe hut was silhouetted against a red sky. For a long space Nance studied it, planning her next move.

She discounted immediately any idea of making her presence known, if the sharp-eyed old man hadn't seen her across the way. If he were guilty, Mr. Darringer might flee, whereas now he thought he was safe. Well, after all, wasn't he? Who could be any safer than he was over there? For it would be easy to cut loose the bridge if an intruder tried to make his way over the gorge.

A stone clicked behind Nance and she jumped. Whirling, she faced two men who had come up silently behind her.

"Mel Rance!" she cried, "What are you doing here?"

The corners of the man's mouth turned up. "Just an idea I had, little one," he told her smoothly, "So I bought the tracking skill of my friend. Chico, to bring us together here where no one can disturb us!"

"Sheriff Markam—" Nance began indignantly, but was interrupted by Rance's malicious chuckle.

"Don't worry about our sheriff," he said, "Chico fixed him. He tried, very clumsily, to follow us—but—a quick tap on the head and a bit of rope eliminated our worthy sheriff."

NANCE backed against a large rock as Rance's smooth voice went on. Desperately she searched her wits for some way out of this fix. Meantime, she pulled the little gun from her belt and pointed it toward him.

His narrow, rather sallow face showed mock concern. He placed a slim hand on his companion's heavy shoulder and reassured the girl. "Chico is most docile, I assure you, my dear!"

Chico was a huge creature; Nance remembered him as a strong and stupid halfbreed who hung around Bluff City dives. He stayed in jail most of the time, and had no reason to love Sheriff Markam. Now, holding the reins of both their mounts, he looked more formidable than she had remembered.

Mel Rance advanced a step, smiling.

"Don't come any nearer!" Nance warned and her lips tightened as she followed his advance with the little .22 caliber gun. "And remember Mr. Darringer lives across the canyon!"

"A waste of breath!" Rance derided her. He glanced across the chasm and added, "Even if he bothered to investigate, he'd be too late."

Rance stepped nearer, and Nance saw Chico slip over toward the side; mentally, she set a line and determined that when Rance stepped over it she would pull the trigger. Rance slowed but continued to come nearer. Then she pulled the trigger.

There was a cry from Rance as the little bullet buried itself in his shoulder. Nance heard Chico grunt in surprise, but had no time to look his way, for Rance, with a low curse stepped in quickly and grabbed her arm. Nance screamed and clawed at his slim fingers as they tightened on her wrist, but the gun was shaken from her grasp. The rocks spun crazily about her. Clawing and biting, she fought the man with all the vigor of her sturdy body, but Rance showed surprising strength. His face was close to hers.

"Help! Mr. Darringer! Help!" Nance shrieked.

Her soft, bright hair was in her eyes and she heard her shirt sleeve tear

when she tried to wrench free. Rance laughed vindictively. "I've been waiting for this, you snooty wildcat—watching and waiting to get even! Now I've got you where no two-bit hero can ride up and help. You are as helpless as that trapper father of yours was when he woke and tried to avoid the blow I gave him with his own gold-heavy money sack!"

Rance shook Nance roughly; there was a murderous light in his long, pale eyes. "You always figured yourself too good for me, didn't you? Me, a university graduate and you a common desert brat!"

The man must be crazy, Nance thought. There was a hollow, hopeless sort of feeling in her heart. Wildly she looked around, but she saw nothing but sand and rock and stunted growth—and the two grinning faces of her tormentors.

Nance used all her strength to jerk free of Rance's grasp. It was unsuccessful but she saw a grimace of pain cross his face as her efforts jerked his wounded shoulder, to change suddenly into an expression of killing fury. Looking into the flaming eyes so close to hers, Nance was sure she would die here in the badlands and be left for the coyotes and buzzards to finish. The halfbreed had not heard Rance's low, furious words, but she knew that Rance would never have admitted killing her father had he meant her to live.

Then, in a wild spiral of joy, Nance heard a harsh voice snap out: "Drap back and h'ist 'em!"

RANCE SPUN about to face this unexpected challenged that had stepped so suddenly from behind a boulder.

Old Darringer faced the girl's tormentors. He held a battered single-barrel shotgun hip-high. There was grim contempt on his dirty, whiskered face.

Rance's pale eyes widened in fear. "How'd you get here?"

Darringer laughed mockingly. "Wasn't much of a trick." He eyed the half-breed sourly and remarked, "You picked yoreself a mighty dumb guide—or he's blind and deef—cause I made enough noise for a cow herd crossin' that bridge."

The halfbreed said nothing, but, through a whirling haze of relief Nance saw his muscles bunch under his faded blue shirt when the trapper's eyes turned toward Rance. For an instant she had no voice. Then, suddenly, she could scream: "Look out!"

Chico leaped.

The shotgun roared, blasting the halfbreed backward; he fell in a heap to the ground and lay still.

But Rance took advantage of the interruption. He dodged behind the big rock and headed for the lip of the canyon in great leaps. Old Darringer made a move as though to stop him. But by the time the old man had shoved another shell into the empty chamber Rance was out of sight.

Almost at once there came a cry from the canyon, followed by the sound of sliding gravel, then, the faintly visible rope, where it rose from the chasm, shook violently.

Darringer nodded. "Thought the varmint might try a trick like that. Lucky I took them boards out where I did." The old trapper turned belatedly to Nance. "You ain't hurt, gal?"

Shakily, Nance walked toward the old man. "Mr. Darringer," she said earnestly, "I should have known you didn't kill my father! Let's both go home—quickly—to Pete! We can get him out of jail now!"

Perplexity creased the trapper's forehead. He shook the girl lightly. "What kind of gab you talkin', gal?" he asked roughly, "What about Pete, and killin' and jail?"

Nance's eyes met his squarely. "My father was murdered, Mr. Darringer," she told him. "Some of his money was found on Pete. I thought you had killed Pop, so I came to look for you to ask

you to come back with me and save Pete." Nance paused for breath. "I was too quick to suspect you, I reckon, but I knew you didn't approve of Pete loving Pop Tebbel's girl!"

"Now it is all clear," she said, "Rance has confessed that he killed my father—" Suddenly a thought crossed her mind. "Mr. Darringer! Rance—he fell in the canyon! Who will believe us now? Not Sheriff Markam!"

The old man grinned and rubbed his whiskers with a rasping sound. He dug for his battered pipe and answered calmly: "No need to git stirred up, gal. He ain't fell in, I don't reckon; and if he gits acrost, thar ain't no place for him to go."

SOUND OF frenzied hoofbeats caused Darringer to leap behind the big rock, dragging Nance with him, only to reappear as Sheriff Markam's fat, sweating figure hove in sight astride a lathered bay.

"Nance, here I am!" the sheriff panted. He looked around. "Where's Rance?"

Nancy tugged on the Sheriff's boot. "Mr. Markam!" she cried, "Rance killed Pop! If it hadn't been for Mr. Darringer, he would have killed me too!"

The sheriff's face twisted contritely. "I'm a locoed maverick for ever gettin' you in this fix! But everything would have been swell, except for my dadblamed carelessness!" Cass showed them raw, bloody wrists and a blood-spattered handkerchief bound tightly around his head. "That cat-footed Chico jumped me. Saw him as he hit. When I come to it took a spell to wiggle out of them ropes and catch up my hoss." Then Cass nodded toward the dead half-breed with satisfaction and congratulated Darringer, "See you got the varmint, eh?"

The sheriff dismounted painfully and took Nance gently in his arms. "Gosh, gal! When I think about the danger I put you in, I get a chill down my back!"

Nance couldn't make head nor tails of what he was saying, but she was glad of his comforting nearness.

Old Darringer grunted impatiently as a call came faintly to them from the shadowy chasm some hundred feet away. Pete's father flicked a thumb that way and observed dryly: "Thar's Tebbel's killer, sheriff."

They ran to the brink of the canyon. The old man indicated the ropes that sagged across the chasm, and chuckled. "Yonder's my private bridge," he said, "A mite risky, I'll grant ye, but rope costs money and it ain't give way yet—and thar the varmint be."

Rance must have gone hand-over-hand along the rope like an ape, for now he was swinging by his hands some ten yards out, trying desperately to scramble onto the flooring of the swaying structure, while the frayed old rope creaked and groaned at its mooring. Nance could see where Darringer had taken out the floor boards. This had slowed the man's escape; otherwise he would have been across the canyon by now.

As they looked, Rance found footing and scrambled upright onto the rickity bridge and began making his way toward the other side. Cass Markam roared: "Come back or I'll cut the ropes!"

The words stopped Rance like so many bullets. He turned to face the sheriff and saw Cass make a move toward the gray worn ropes with a bright knife blade. "Wait!" Rance screamed; "I'll come in!" and started creeping toward them.

The bridge complained under the man's weight like an old man who feels he is being imposed upon. They saw Rance glance down into the awesome depths of Sliding Canyon, then apparently lose his nerve and start to run.

"You fool, take it easy!" Darringer shouted.

When Rance reached the point where

there were no floor boards to the bridge he stopped, clutching a side rope in each hand. His eyes were wide and scared. "Come get me off of here!" he shouted hysterically. "Quick! Before I fall down into there!" His eyes rolled apprehensively toward the canyon floor.

CASS MARKAM eyed him contemptuously. Did you kill Mr. Tebbel?" the sheriff asked unfeelingly, motioning toward the ropes with his knife. "Yes! But don't just stand there! Get me off!"

"Put the floor boards back in place, Darringer," Cass said; we'll save him for the hang-rope."

A swishing sound near the big rock that anchored Darringer's bridge startled them all. They turned in time to see the snake-like writhing of a strand of the nearest rope as the worn fibers parted. Then, rapidly, as though tired of their responsibility, one strand, then another, and another broke out of their deep coils. The sheriff was the first to realize what was happening. He yelled at Rance still hesitating on the bridge: "Jump! The rope's breakin'!"

But he was too late. One side of the suspension bridge collapsed with a final snap of rotted fibers; with a shriek and a last desperate clawing for a handhold, Rance dropped heavily to the loose shaley ground, ten feet below.

For several seconds the man fought for shooting, scrambling and flailing his arms against the trembling mass of loose shale. Then, with a slithering roar, tons of the stuff sagged under him and Rance, with one last, smothered yell, disappeared before the horrified watchers' eyes, to join the pinto below.

The sheriff mopped his face and Nance turned away, shuddering. Even the face of tough old Darringer was pale in the failing light. The sheriff patted Nance's shoulder soothingly. "Don't take on so, gal," he said; "it's better that way. Reckon you might call it 'badlands justice'."

SWEATY and, tired, the sheriff Pete Darringer, his father, and Nance sat later in an all-night cafe over big mugs of coffee. Cass looked from one to the other apologetically. "I was too smart for my britches," he said humbly.

"Oh, no, Mr. Markam," Nance reassured him; "but how in the world did you know?"

Markam shook his graying head, "I didn't *know*, Nance, gal, but I figgered your pa was killed for more than his money, so it looked bad for the Darringers. You see, a thief after just money would have waited around for your pa to leave his cabin and then break in, for Mr. Tebbel didn't stay home much. But your pa was killed while he slept, so I wondered why."

The sheriff sipped his scalding coffee slowly, then went on: "Love and hate—they cause more killin's than money—and they both showed up here. I had to find it." Cass looked at Pete. "You had both, boy—but without real motive." Then he prodded the forefinger of his big right hand at Pete's father. "You, Mr. Darringer, had the hate, but you were way out in the badlands at the time Tebbel's gold was in town. So—" Cass paused for emphasis, "it seemed most likely that the killer too, was in town.

"I had to smoke the coon out of his hole!" The sheriff's eyes softened.

"Reckon you won't like this, gal, but I used you for bait. I put it into your head to go after Mr. Darringer. You knew the badlands, and I figgered on being nearby—but—gal—I plumb forgot about Sliding Canyon."

Cass ran hard fingers through his hair as he looked from one to the other for some comment. When none was made he resumed his narrative. "The coon left his hole. I had a pretty good idea who I was lookin' for, but ideas ain't evidence. The pieces began fittin' together when I seen you and Rance in the store—the way he looked at you.

"That Rance is a bad one—lovin' you, Nance, in his way—yet hatin' you, too, as a trapper's gal he knew was too good for him."

Cass set down his cup and refilled it before he concluded his story. "That's all, *amigos*. The rest you know. Rance fell into my trap and followed you. I followed him, got careless and let that sneakin' halfbreed, Chico, slip up on me, and almost lost my Nance."

"But why did Pete have Pop's money?" Nance asked.

"Let Pete tell you, if he will."

Pete hung his dark head sheepishly. "Reckon I been loco! I gambled, Nance. Rance let me win, and paid me with money I recognized as your dad's by the toothmarks—since he was the only one around here had that money-bitin' habit. When I accused Rance of stealing them, he laughed and told me he had won 'em from *my* pa." The boy shot a look toward Mr. Darringer and his brows drew down in mock ferocity. "And I'm kinda fond of the whiskered old coot. You understand, don't you, Nance?"

"Pete! Of course I do!"

Nance glanced at Pete, shyly possessive. Their hands crept together.

Cass cleared his throat. "This, my old friend," he said sternly, fixing a meaningful glare upon Darringer, "is where we—er—how do the young bucks say it?—oh, yeah, is where we scram."

★

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Had he killed this young man unnecessarily? Larsh Macree's conscience troubled him — perhaps he could have merely shot to disarm. For everyone would make the unfortunate personal connection — Clay Anderson had been the son of the woman Larsh had loved and lost years ago.

A DEATH TO AVENGE

Novelet of Lawman's Dilemma

by WILLIAM F. SCHWARTZ

FOR THE second time that morning, Larsh Macree sensed that he was being followed—still, glancing backward over his shoulder as he guided his sorrel gelding slowly and carefully down the steep, boulder-strewn mountainside, he could detect no signs of pursuit.

But a feeling of uneasiness persisted, held him in its grip. Even now, there was an unfathomable—and perhaps imaginary—itching in the small of his back, as though some sixth sense were warning him. Almost unconsciously, he gritted his teeth in expectation and kept his ears tuned for the whine of a bullet.

Suddenly, he was angry with himself; Larsh stifled a curse and blamed it on his nerves—maybe his conscience was bothering him, he told himself.

But why should his conscience bother him? Just because he killed a man? Clay Anderson, he reminded himself, grimly, was not the first man he had ever killed. But, once again, an inner voice mocked him: *You made a mistake—a gross, blundering mistake—in killing Anderson.*

Larsh rode along, his eyes—starkly blue in a sun-browned, leathery face—probing the larger boulders along the trail. Any one of them would afford ample concealment for a bushwhacker. Now and then, he scanned the stand of tall, towering pines behind him on the mountain he was leaving and cast his eyes also in the direction of the Purple Mountains—whose peaks seemed to gnaw at a cloudless azure sky like jagged, crooked teeth.

Larsh Macree was a tall man in the saddle of his high sorrel gelding. His shoulders were bony but broad and his body formed a "v" shape as it narrowed down to almost non-existent hips and

belly. His face was set, almost wooden in expression; his mouth, a narrow straight line; his eyes, brooding caverns of bitterness. His clothes were plain—a gray flannel shirt open at the neck, a blue polka dot kerchief, blue denims, a dusty high-crowned stetson, its brim curled upward on both sides; and worn black leather boots with short-rowled spurs. Larsh was forty years old — almost too old, he often told himself, for the five-pointed deputy sheriff's badge that gleamed dully on his shirt above his heart.

Once more, his vagrant mind wandered back to Clay Anderson. The last time he had seen Clay, they were carrying his body on a shutter toward the Elite Funeral Parlor in Benton. Clay had died suddenly, his life ripped from him by a bullet from the Colt .45 that Larsh Macree wore on his left side. And Larsh was learning to hate himself for that killing.

Sure, it was a fair fight, Larsh told himself for maybe the tenth time since Clay had died. Sure, he was upholding the Law, shooting in self-defense when he had gunned down Clay. *But was Clay Anderson the right man for me to kill?*

ANDERSON was merely a misguided, headstrong, reckless youth. Perhaps, Larsh told himself, he should have been more careful to shoot to disarm—instead of to kill—when young Anderson had faced him yesterday, with gun drawn, on the dusty main street of Benton. But Clay had pulled his gun first, had even fired first. Remembering it now, Larsh recalled that his sorrel gelding had reared, just as Clay's gun barked. Still in the saddle, Larsh had drawn and fired in return. Because the sorrel had reared, Larsh knew now, his life had been spared—and Clay had lost his. Clay, who had been standing with long legs spread apart, had crumpled—died instantly when Larsh's .45 spat flame.

He hadn't meant to kill Clay—and now he blamed it on the gelding. But maybe, Larsh chided himself, such reasoning was merely to salve his own conscience. Anderson was supposed to be fast and deadly with a gun. Maybe he, himself, had fired hurriedly because he was afraid Clay might best him in the gun duel.

Fast with a gun? Larsh Macree mocked himself again. Was there anyone faster with a gun than he, himself? In his ten years as a lawman, and even before that, he had encountered none who was swifter, more deadly with a hand-gun.

That's why, his conscience smote at him again, gunning down Clay Anderson—still a kid in years—might be viewed as something akin to murder. Legalized murder, of course,—justifiable homicide, they called it—because he was a lawman. But, inside, he wondered—and he knew others would wonder, too; on the surface, at least, there would appear to be more than just a killing of a law-breaker in the death of Clay Anderson.

Why did Clay Anderson have to be Molly's son? Larsh asked himself.

Molly Coultry. After all these years, Larsh Macree still carried the memory of Molly Coultry's kisses. He had loved Molly when he was young and she was young; as young as—as young as, his conscience struck at him again. Clay Anderson had been yesterday.

Maybe he still loved Molly, Larsh told himself. Why, he was almost certain of it, even though she was another man's wife, had been for all these years. He had never even considered another woman after he and Molly had broken off keeping company.

He had not really meant to kill Clay; and now he regretted it, as deeply as a man could regret anything.

Larsh and Molly Coultry had been sweethearts years before. But they had quarreled—a silly lover's spat—as Larsh remembered it now. And each had been too proud to call the other back. After five years of waiting—the

last three of which Larsh had spent away from home, wandering almost aimlessly from one job to another in New Mexico, Texas and Arizona—Molly Coultry had married Delph Anderson, a man ten years older than Larsh, and heir to the Bar X ranch.

CLAY ANDERSON, because he was reckless, had turned bandit; he was one of three who had robbed a stage near Canyon City. Larsh knew it was not his first holdup—but this time he had been recognized when his mask slipped off his face.

Macree had set out in search of the three bandits as soon as word of the holdup reached him at his office in Canyon City. He followed their trail across the mountains into Benton. The trail was almost easy to follow because the mount of one of the outlaws wore a defective shoe. That shoe turned out to belong to the horse that Clay Anderson had ridden.

At Benton, Larsh Macree caught up with young Anderson. The other two bandits had skirted the town, but Clay Anderson had ridden into Benton for a new shoe for his saddler. Coming out of a bar, Clay was surprised by Larsh, who had just entered Benton astride his gelding. Clay stood on the street and fired. Larsh was forced to return that fire—and young Anderson died.

Larsh Macree had set out on the trail of the other two outlaws. That was his first task, he told himself; to track them down. After that, he would have to return to Canyon City.

He viewed his own return to Canyon City with a feeling that was almost dread. He knew what people might say. He had deliberately killed Clay, because the young bandit was the son of the woman he had once loved—the woman as it appeared, who had rejected him and married another.

But there was even more than the opinion of the citizens of Canyon City to consider. How would Molly take the news? And Delph Anderson? And Clay's brothers, Mark and Nance? Maybe the other three men of the Anderson household would seek him out, anxious for revenge. What would happen if, he were forced to kill still more of the Anderson clan?

Larsh mulled the questions over in his tormented brain. Maybe, he told himself, it would be better for all concerned if he never returned to Canyon City. But would that be the end of it?

B—whang!

The angry whine of a bullet aroused Larsh Macree, suddenly, from his moody reverie. He flung himself from the saddle at the same instant he felt the windlash pass his face by inches. He was falling to the rocky ground when another shot followed the first—and missed. He scrambled, frantically, behind a huge boulder while the echoes of the shots were still rolling through the mountains.

At last, he had caught up with the other two bandits—or, rather, they had caught up with him. During these last few hours, he had been less cautious than usual. Now they had him pinned down, trapped. As yet, he wasn't certain of the direction whence the shots had come. But the bandits were somewhere close; of that, he was sure.

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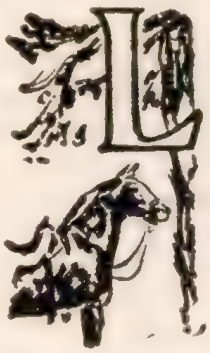

LARSH MACREE hugged the hard earth behind the protecting boulder. His own .45 was in his hand now and, warily, lifting his head only a few inches from the ground, he scanned the sky for tell-tale signs of powdersmoke. But he could see no smoke, he soon learned, unless he raised his head above the boulder. And that, would be practically suicide.

He decided to lie still for the time being—and wait. He could see the gelding. His saddler had halted about thirty yards away; it, too, seemed to be waiting, patiently. Larsh yearned for the rifle that was in a scabbard at the gelding's side. With only his .45, he would have to wait until his attackers closed in—*if* they closed in—before he could get them within pistol range.

Macree lay prone on the ground, while the sun, climbing higher into the cloudless sky, began to scorch the rocks. Larsh could feel the sun growing hot on his back and legs. He began to long for the canteen that was with the gelding—which, now, had found some stubble of grasses amid the rocks and was tugging them loose.

Since the first shots, there had been no sight, no sound of the bandits. Lying motionless, Larsh still wondered where they were. Were they, too, still hiding, were they slowly inching up on him?

They couldn't see him in his present location, he was sure, or else they would have sent more bullets winging his way. Perhaps now, he told himself, they were debating with each other whether or not that first fusillade of shots had killed him. Of course, they had seen him scramble behind the rocks after they fired. But how were they to know whether or not he had been mortally wounded and had crawled behind the boulder to die?

There was no choice, Larsh told himself, but to play the waiting game. If they decided to come after him, to investigate whether or not he was dead—well—he'd have a chance, even though it was two against one. Yes, he reminded himself—grimly, without boasting—he had pitted himself before against even greater odds.

Of course, they might lack the courage to come close. Maybe they would ride away; maybe they had fled already, were putting miles and miles between themselves and the rock. But Larsh Macree played a hunch. He stayed put, waiting patiently; if they wanted him, they'd have to come after him. He wouldn't show himself from behind the rock to face a hidden foe. He was too old, had lived too long to be that foolish.

Overhead, the sun blazed down. The rocks around Macree were blistering to the touch and the barrel of the .45 in his hand was almost as hot as a branding iron. But still Larsh waited, while the scorching rays of the sun tormented him, while he sweated from every pore. His throat, his mouth were raw with dryness.

But still he waited.

And, finally, they came, after he had lain there for hours.

IT WAS THE gelding that gave Larsh Macree warning. The sorrel whinnied suddenly and somewhere nearby—off among the rocks, a man cursed it.

Larsh didn't rise. Instead, he rolled from behind the rock, pointing his sixgun as he rolled. At first he saw only one man—a stranger to him, a tall, lean youth in a blue flannel shirt — heading for the rock behind which Macree had hidden. The youth was crouched low and hurrying forward on sock-clad feet. Larsh surmised that the bandit had removed his boots to be more stealthy in his approach.

The youth, his eyes intent on the rock, had apparently seen Larsh as soon as the lawman rolled from behind the boulder. The young outlaw raised his sixshooter, fired. The shot was wild; Larsh heard the bullet whistling over his head.

Then, in turn, Larsh fired quickly. The youth halted suddenly, his body buckling as the bullet tore into him. Then he sprawled forward, clutching his chest.

Larsh had no time to watch him further; from a hiding place, the other bandit started to pepper the rock with rifle fire. A small piece of boulder was

blasted loose and stung Larsh as it struck him in the face. Larsh rolled back again, frantically seeking the boulder's protection once more.

Larsh lay still a moment, waiting again. But, this time, it was no long wait; to his ears, came the sound of pounding hoofbeats. The other bandit was fleeing from the scene, abandoning his partner.

Larsh ran toward the youth on the ground, whistling for his gelding as he rushed forward. He had his sixgun ready, just in case the youth would stir.

One look, however, convinced Larsh that the young bandit was dead. Larsh quickly mounted the gelding, started of in pursuit of the other outlaw, who was astride a big bay horse that was careening madly down the steep slope of the mountainside.

Following the second bandit, Larsh found himself breathing blasphemy. The going was too treacherous for the pace the other rider was setting—and the outlaw was threatening to out-distance him. Larsh urged his gelding forward, at a slower speed than the wildly galloping bay. There was no use in risking his neck, he told himself, in a mad descent down the boulder-strewn mountainside. Caution urged him to wait until they reached the floor of the valley before he gave full chase. But, then, he reminded himself, grimly, it might be too late; the bandit might have too great a start and might elude him.

THEN IT happened. The big bay horse suddenly lost its footing; horse and rider went tumbling down the slope. The bay did an almost complete somersault in the air, throwing its rider from the saddle.

Both horse and bandit were sprawled on the rocky ground when Larsh reached them. The bay was struggling and voicing agonized whimpers of pain. The man was silent, still.

Larsh shook his head sadly. He had a distasteful job to do. He dismounted, walked over to the horse, pressed his .45 to its head. With one shot, Larsh ended the bay's agony; the horse, he saw, had two broken legs.

The man, also a stranger to Larsh, was already dead. His head twisted into a grotesque position. His neck had been snapped by the fall.

Slowly, Larsh began to gather rocks. He'd have to cover the bodies with boulders. The ground, here, was too rocky to dig.

Larsh eased his big sorrel gelding carefully down the mountainside. There was no need for haste; all three bandits were dead, their crime of holding up the stage blotted out. Larsh, now, was carrying the money that had been stolen; he had found it in some saddle-bags on the big bay he had shot. These saddlebags, now, were on his own sorrel gelding.

His job, by rights, was finished; he had recovered the loot and all three bandits had paid... Once more, he told himself, grimly, the Law had won out again.

But was his job finished? the inner voice mocked Larsh again. What awaited him, back in Canyon City, once the news of Clay Anderson's death reached there? Once more, Larsh Macree found himself dreading the consequences of his return there.

Perhaps, he thought again, it would be better if he never returned to Canyon City. He could ride away, down into Texas or Arizona, lose himself there. But the thought stayed with him for only a moment. He was a lawman, his job was not complete. He still had to return the money recovered from the bandits. And why should he dread the reaction for what he had done—in killing Clay? After all, he had only been doing his duty.

TWO DAYS later, Larsh Macree strode into the office of the Continental Express Company in Canyon City and threw the saddle-bags on a desk.

"You'll find the money there," he told Clancy Weeks, the office manager. "The money that was taken in that stage holdup."

He turned to go, but Weeks halted him.

"Good work, Deputy!" Weeks congratulated. Weeks was a short paunchy man whose pale complexion showed he spent too much time indoors. He was wearing a tie and a white shirt with black dust protectors covering the sleeves. "I knew you'd get them, Deputy."

He paused, cocked a yellowish green eye at Larsh. "Of course, we heard already about young Anderson. Too bad the boy turned bandit. We got the news of his—his death by telegraph a couple of days ago. What happened to the other two? Did you get them, too?"

Larsh nodded. He watched Weeks, who had reached into the saddlebags and was counting the money rapidly with his soft white hands. Weeks, Larsh knew, cared little that three men had died.

"It seems to be all there," Weeks announced, his moon face wrinkling into a smile that showed crooked, yellow teeth. "Again I say: 'Good work, Deputy!' "

Larsh nodded again. He held his lips set tight, controlled them because he didn't want to sneer at the office manager, whose congratulations he was starting to hate. Then he asked the question that was uppermost in his mind.

"How are the Andersons taking it?" Larsh probed. "Clay's death, I mean."

Weeks shrugged round, fat little shoulders.

"Hard, I guess." Then his yellowish eyes grew stony. "But what did they expect? If Clay turned outlaw—well—I guess he only got what was coming to him."

"The Andersons, Delph and his two —er—remaining sons," Weeks continued, "left for Benton as soon as word of Clay's death reached here." The office manager raised his eyes again, studied the details of Larsh Macree's bony face. "But there's some," Weeks added, confidentially, as though he were imparting a great secret, "who think the Andersons *also* rode out to look for you."

Larsh stifled a curse, fought back blasphemy that was born of frustration. He had expected something like that!

"But I was only doin' my duty," Larsh said aloud, although more to himself than to Weeks.

"And indeed you were!" Weeks agreed. He was nodding his head up and down. His moon face, now, wore the bland expression of a professional office worker patronizing a customer. "You were *only* doing your duty, Deputy. That was all. You'll find that *I*, at least am behind you—one hundred percent! I—"

Larsh waited for no more. He knew Weeks had more to say, but he didn't want to hear it. He wheeled on his boot heels, strode out the door. He didn't care whether anybody backed him up, and least of all Weeks.

What worried him was how Molly was taking it.

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AND LARSH didn't have long to learn how Molly felt. He found her waiting in his office. Her eyes were red, as though she had been crying; but a brave look was on her face —the pretty oval face that had haunted Larsh's memory through all his lonely bachelor years. She was dressed in black.

"Larsh," she began, "I heard news of Clay's death and—and how he died.

I'll not condemn you for it, because I know you—what kind of a man you are. You wouldn't have killed Clay, unless you were forced to do it. But Delph and my boys—they think differently. They think you deliberately shot Clay because—because I married Delph, instead of you. They left here, in a bitter rage, swearing to get you. I tried to stop them, but it was no use."

Larsh stared down at Molly Anderson. The memory of her kisses still burned within him. But he fought to throw off the feeling. After all, she was another man's wife—and he had killed her son.

"I expected somethin' like this," he told her.

She looked up at him with her soft blue eyes. "And what do you intend to do, Larsh?"

"Do? What can I do?"

"You can leave here—before they return. You can be miles away before they come back from Benton."

Larsh shook his head. He wanted to go; he didn't want to see her hurt further. But—

"If you stay here," Molly continued, fighting to choke back a sob, "there might be more shooting, more killing."

"I know that, Molly. But I can't go—not now."

"Why?" Her tone was a plea. "Why?"

Once more, Larsh Macree ground his teeth together in bitter frustration. How could he explain?

"There's many reasons, Molly. One, maybe, is because I don't like to run."

"Then it's your pride?" she probed. "You don't want to go, because people will say you were a coward who ran away. Is that the reason?"

"Maybe," Larsh said. "But maybe there's more to it than that. Runnin' away from somethin' never does any good. I found that out once when I ran away from you and—and—" He paused. He wanted to add "*and your love.*" But he couldn't. So he talked on, trying to put logic into his words; but inside he knew he was failing, because part of what he was saying, he realized, was a lie.

"Maybe I'm afriad to run, Molly; yes, afraid. They could still come huntin' for me, and a hunted man is a man of fear. He has to watch every door that opens; he has to watch every bit of dust on a trail, because that bit of dust might be comin' from the horse—or horses—of the men who are huntin' for him. No, Molly, I can't run; I hate to risk further pain for you. But I can't—I won't run!"

"Then it's settled?" she asked, her eyes filled with worry. "You mind's made up? You'll stay here? And there'll be more shooting, more killing. Oh, Larsh, I wish I could understand!"

HE PITIED her. Deep inside, the wells of pity were overflowing. But he knew he had to stay, to preserve his self-respect. For other reasons, too, that were bigger than his own feeling.

"Molly," he asked, "can't you see? I'm the Law here. A lawman never runs—no matter what. I'm sorry Clay was killed—God knows how sorry I am—But it couldn't be helped. He shot first; I had to shoot, too. Not only to save my life, but to uphold the Law."

"But—but maybe you could have only wounded him; you could have brought him back—and—and he would have gone to prison. He was so young. Maybe he would have reformed. Maybe he would have mended his ways. They say you're the best shot in the Territory, the fastest man with a gun. Why did you have to kill him?"

"I didn't *want* to kill him!" Larsh declared, with conviction, knowing he was telling the truth. "Mostly because he was your son."

"But my other sons! If you stay here, maybe you'll kill my other sons, too. And maybe my husband."

"Your husband!" Larsh echoed, hollowly. Even now, he hated to be re-

minded that Molly had wedded another man. "Do you love him?"

"I married him, Larsh," Molly said, quietly. "I've lived with him all these years; he's been very kind to me."

"But do you love him?" Larsh insisted. He wanted to know—more than anything else, he wanted to know.

Molly bowed her head. Then she raised her eyes. There was pity in them, he saw — pity, for him, he realized, while his heart pounded in his chest.

"What do you want me to say?" she probed. "That I don't love him? That I love you? If I tell you, it's you I love and not he—then—then will you go? If I were to—to consider going with you, would you spare his life—and maybe my sons, too. Is that what you want?"

Larsh shook his head. "No, Molly," he told her, fighting to choke back the emotion that was flooding through him. "I don't want that; neither do you. All I want is the truth. Do you love him?"

Her answer was low, so low he could barely hear her. "I—I love him, Larsh. I love Delph."

And suddenly Larsh Macree realized how boundless despair can be. "Then Delph won't die," he found himself telling her. "Neither will your sons."

"Then you'll go?" she asked. Hope, now,—and gratitude—was in her voice.

He shook his head. "No, Molly. I won't go. But don't worry; I won't cause you any more pain—you've suffered enough already."

"But what will you do?" she asked. There was pleading in her eyes—and dread.

"I don't know," he told her, quietly. "But what I do know is that I'm the Law—and I can't run." Then he added, as gently as he could, but sternly, too, because he could no longer endure her eyes. "You better go now, Molly."

And she went, leaving him feeling hollow and empty inside, like a man who has lost all hope.

CANYON CITY had a weekly newspaper, a four page sheet christened

The Canyon City Call. And the next visitor to Larsh Macree's office was Bart Rogers, who was the editor, printer and reporter.

Rogers stalked in Larsh's office on long, lean crane-like legs. He was a tall man, almost as tall as Larsh. Rogers had a high forehead, sunken cheeks and wore a flowing gray moustache and goatee. Both moustache and goatee were now smudged with printer's ink. The newspaperman carried a long thin sheet of paper with printed matter on it in his skinny, grimy hands.

Rogers said, "Here's the proofs of the shooting in Benton. I know the editor of the *Benton Herald* and he telegraphed the whole story to me. It says young Anderson shot first, while you were still on your mount. Is that true?"

Larsh nodded. "Yes," he said; "that's true." He wished Rogers would go; he wanted to be alone—still wanted to think things over.

"I'd like a statement from you, too, Deputy," Rogers went on. "I want your version of the story. Here. Read these proofs. Is this story accurate?"

Reluctantly, Larsh accepted the paper, cast his eyes on the print.

"The story seems accurate," he told Rogers, finally. "But I got no statement; I don't want to make matters worse. Maybe I better say nothin' more about it."

At first, Larsh thought Rogers was going to argue, to insist on a statement. But he didn't.

"Okay," the newspaperman said and wheeled to go. "You know your business. If you want no statement, I'll not press you for it. Besides, it's past deadline time. *The Call* should have been printed hours ago."

The newspaperman headed for the door. But then he stopped halfway. "Think you'll need any help?" he queried. "Think you ought to wire the County Seat for the Sheriff?"

Larsh shook his head. "No. I don't think so."

"Well, you know your own business," Rogers said. "I guess you know what you're doing." Then he disappeared through the door.

Larsh watched him go and wondered, inside, whether he did know what he was doing. The Andersons would return, eventually. By all indications, they would want to fight, to avenge the death of a member of their family. And his own duty was to uphold the Law. What was he to do? What course would he take when the Andersons reached Canyon City? He wasn't sure, even now. But he didn't want to cause Molly any more sorrow, even if she was married to and loved another man, a man, who, maybe, at this very minute, was swearing to kill him.

And, finally, they came. The Andersons.

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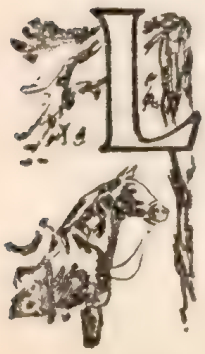

LARSH MACREE had news of their approach from Mike Donnelly, an acquaintance who had passed them on the trail. Donnelly was ramrod for one of the cattle outfits near Canyon City.

"They're comin'." Donnelly told Larsh. "They got a wagon with a coffin in it, with Clay's body inside, I reckon. Mark Anderson is drivin' the wagon; Delph and his other son is ridin' their mounts, as an escort, I guess. They're lookin' mighty grim, Larsh. I spoke to them—but they didn't even answer. I thought I better ride here and warn yuh."

"Thanks," Larsh said, simply.

Donnelly added, "They should be here in a couple of hours. What you figurin' on doin', Larsh? If yuh need help—well—swear me in as your deputy and I'll round up some of my boys. There's a couple of them drinkin' down at *Lacey's Bar*."

Larsh shook his head. "No, thanks, Mike; I'll have to handle this myself, I reckon."

After Donnelly left his office, Macree went for his gunbelt, which was hanging from a nail on the wall. For a second or two, he debated whether or not he should carry his .45 with him. Maybe, he reasoned at first, if he went unarmed to face the Andersons, they would withhold their fire until he had a chance to explain. But, quickly, he decided against it. He was a lawman, and the .45 was as much the badge of a lawman as the star he wore on his chest. He could not walk out into the streets without it. Besides, if he went unarmed, there would be some who would scoff at the Law—say he didn't dare face the Andersons with a gun at his side.

Larsh Macree walked to the door of his office and glanced down the sun-baked main street of Canyon City. The place looked like a ghost town. There were no pedestrians, no riders in sight. Even the horses were gone from the hitching racks. The citizens of Canyon City had, wisely, gone indoors to wait until the gunplay was over.

But would there be gunplay? Even now, Larsh Macree wasn't certain.

Larsh took a chair from his office, lowered his bony frame on it and tilted it back against the front of the building. He sat there, ignoring the heat of the sunlight, and fashioned a cigaret

with steady hands. There was nothing to do now, he knew, but to wait for the Andersons.

FINALLY, they came. He saw them coming and listened to the rattle of their wagon on the bumpy road—the wagon that was bearing the body of the youth who had died before his gunfire.

Larsh stood up, walked slowly out into the deserted street. He wanted them to see him, to know that he was still here in Canyon City.

Mark Anderson, still in the driver's seat of the wagon, brought the team to a halt. There was a hurried consultation among the Andersons. They were still too far away to hear their voices or to read their faces. But their actions were enough to tell Larsh Macree what they had in mind.

First Delph, the father, and Nance dismounted, led their horses behind a protecting building. Mark, too, disappeared with the wagon. Inside, Larsh felt respect for the Andersons; he knew they were not running, or even planning an ambush. They were merely protecting their horses from the bullets that were expected to fly.

Soon the Andersons emerged from behind the building. They marched into the sun-lit, empty street like soldiers on parade. Delph, a tall, proud figure with heavy shoulders and graying hair, was in the middle, the most dangerous spot. A son flanked him on either side. They moved, steadily, three abreast, down the dusty, wagon-rutted road. They advanced on Larsh like deadly automatons, their hands close to the six-shooters at their hips.

And Larsh Macree began to walk slowly toward them. It was three against one. Not a fair fight, really, he told himself; but he knew what was in their minds. They knew he was swift, unfailing with a .45. He was sure to get one of them, he knew they were figuring; or maybe two; but surely not all three.

And Larsh felt no fear. Guns and

gunplay to him were as commonplace, almost, as eating and sleeping to other men. But, inside, his guts were curling, threatening to tie into knots.

He didn't want to kill any more Andersons! He didn't want to cause Molly any more sorrow, but what could he do? They were out to blast him down. What could he do? Withhold his own fire? Let them kill him?

Maybe that would be a way out, his weary brain told him. His own death would end it all, solve his problem.

But would it end Molly's sorrow, solve *her* problems? The West was growing now; law, at last, was taking hold. If the Andersons blasted him down now, there would be other lawmen who would come seeking the Andersons out. They would come to avenge the death of a brother officer, would never rest until all three Andersons met death from gunfire or from a noose on a tree. The Law was inexorable; the Law would always win.

Larsh Macree halted suddenly. "Stop!" he ordered the Andersons, and his voice was firm. The voice of a lawman. "Keep away from your guns! I want no gunplay here."

It was Delph Anderson who scoffed at him. "Go for your gun, Macree! We'll give you a chance. I'll count three. Then we'll draw!" Delph's hand

formed a claw over his .45. "*One*!" he began. "*Two*!"

THEN, SUDDENLY, a woman screamed; Molly Anderson came running out into the street.

"I can't let you do it!" she was repeating. "I can't let you do it!"

Her husband eyed her in shocked surprise. "Get out of the way, Molly!" Delph commanded.

But Molly Anderson ignored her husband's command. She hurried forward, until her body was a shield protecting the deputy sheriff.

"No!" she pleaded. "No!"

"Get outta the way, Maw!" Mark Anderson shouted at her. "Don't hide that—that buzzard; he ain't fit to live."

"Mark! Nance!" Molly ordered. Her face was firm; her eyes, resolute. "Give me your guns! Do you hear me? I'm your mother!" She advanced on them, her hands outstretched, reaching for their weapons.

"No, Maw! No!" her sons protested. But they backed away from her, breaking up the deadly formation that, a moment before, had threatened Larsh Macree.

"Molly, don't do this!" Delph Anderson entreated, eyeing, bleakly, the swarm of curious townspeople who were swarming into the street. "Don't make a scene. This—this man killed Clay; don't you see, he must die!"

"*I say not*!" Molly insisted. "Delph," she told her husband, calmly, but with a determined timbre in her voice, "if you love me, forget this insanity. I know the whole story. Lambert Rogers told me. Clay fired first—and, even then. Larsh didn't want to kill him."

"He didn't?" Delph Anderson's face, his voice showed disbelief. "Then *why* did he kill him? Surely, he could have captured Clay, brought him here to stand trial. Why did he have to kill him? No, Molly, we have to fight this out. It's Macree or us. I couldn't live in peace with the memory of Clay's death on my mind."

Suddenly Larsh Macree intervened. Even now, he told himself, he had waited too long. He was the Law; he couldn't hide behind a woman's skirt, even for Molly's sake. He was the Law. He had to command the situation, show he could take care of any emergency.

The people of Canyon City would remember this day forever. He had to show them that Larsh Macree, representing the Law, had prevailed.

"DELPH ANDERSON!" Larsh barked. "Throw away your gun!" Larsh was hurrying forward as he spoke. He wanted no gunplay; he didn't want to endanger the lives of the people who had gathered in the street. "I didn't want to kill your boy, Anderson. My horse reared when we shot it out—and Clay's death was an accident. You don't have to believe me; you can read it in the newspaper. I sympathize with you because your son is dead, but that gives you no call to come here, threatenin' me. You're under arrest! For threatenin' a peace officer!" Before he was finished talking, his gun was out and jammed against Delph Anderson's chest.

"You're under arrest!" Larsh repeated, bluntly. Then to Delph's sons, who were watching the scene with wary eyes, he added, "Want to fight now? Draw your guns—and your father dies." But those last words, he knew, were lies—a bluff. He could never gun a man who was as helpless now as Delph Anderson. Then Larsh turned to Molly, "I hope you understand," he told her.

She stared into Larsh's eyes for a second. "I think I do," she said.

"Then take their guns," he directed her. "Keep their guns until they cool off." Larsh turned to Delph Anderson again. "But I have to lock you up—you and your sons; I'll convince you that I didn't want to kill Clay, even if I have to bring every man, woman, and child over from Benton to prove it. But you'll stay in jail until I do." Then

Larsh wheeled on the gathering of people who had clustered close. "Back to your business!" he ordered, brusquely. "The show's over."

The crowd melted, reluctantly, and Larsh Macree stared at the anger, the rage that had assembled itself anew in Delph Anderson's face. The threat of jail was hard for a proud man like Delph Anderson to take. If he marched Delph Anderson off to jail now, Larsh knew, Delph Anderson would be his enemy forever. The town of Canyon City would never be big enough to hold them both.

And, inside, Larsh felt pity for the cattleman. He asked himself, how he himself would have acted if Molly had married him, and his own son had been the one who had been killed. Maybe he would have come to kill, too.

And, anyway, the tension was over.

"On second thought," Larsh said, "we'll forget about jail, about charges of threatenin' a peace officer; you've suffered enough, all of you. I'm sorry I killed Clay. It was an accident. But, remember," he added, quietly, "he broke the Law. I only did my duty."

Then he whirled, started to stride away. "You can give them back their guns now, Mrs. Anderson," he said, over his shoulder. In his heart, he knew, everything he had done was right—and, for now, Molly would be able to hold them in check.

Time would heal the wounds; Delph Anderson would learn the whole story. He would forget revenge. Yes, time would heal all wounds except the one in his own heart. Maybe, some day soon, he would ride on, try to forget.

★

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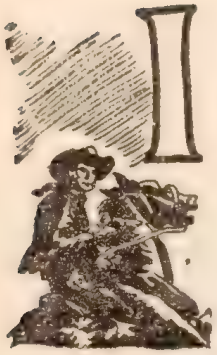
Special Feature

The Great Como Indian War

by NAN BAKER



INDIAN WARS in the days of the early West were bloody affairs, and white men and red men alike tried to avoid them. They happened frequently, nonetheless, and held great terror for anyone in the least concerned. Consequently, methods sometimes used to prevent Indian uprisings were far from orthodox.

It was quite common, for instance, for the U.S. Army to place a high price on the head of a hostile chief. One such incident occurred in the case of a great fighter named Delche. The reward offered for his head was particularly high. As a result, the head of Delche was brought in several times—a different head every time—and paid for on each occasion.

In the small mining town of Como, Nevada, the miners chose to simply ignore the native tribes and hope that the savages would do the same. The tribe nearest was Paiute, and seemed equally satisfied to let the settlement and its activities alone. Until, that is, it became apparent that the white men were destroying a large source of their winter staples. To further their mining operations, it had become necessary for the settlers to chop down many of the pinion pines covering the neighboring hillsides. The Paiute chief, Numaga, one day paid a visit to the mine owners and explained that the trees supplied his tribe with valuable pine nuts as a winter food. The miners chose to ignore the plea to leave the trees standing and proceeded to destroy them all the faster.

Soon after, as one group worked feverishly at chopping the pines, they noticed a group of Indians silently watching. Perhaps because of their guilty consciences at disregarding the Paiute request to save trees, the band of white men fled to the settlement and announced that the Paiutes were on the warpath.

A message was sent to Fort Churchill pleading for troops, the camp devised a password and prepared for seige by the savage Paiutes.

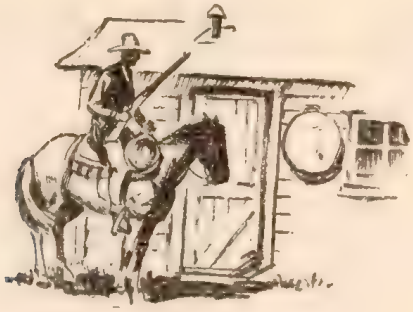
Two old miners chose this brief period of time to return to camp; and, ignorant of the recent Indian developments and the new password, they were fired upon in the dark as the red enemy.

One over-anxious resident upon hearing the shots, excitedly fell over his own gun and accidently discharging it, set the entire male population of Como volleying over the walls at the non-existent foe.

When morning came, everyone crept out of the stockade to count the dead Indians. Instead they found only the two old miners, cowering behind a huge boulder. Then into the bewildered camp strode Chief Numaga to inquire about all the shooting during the night. Would the white men please explain what had happened, he asked? His braves had been very much upset over all the disturbance.

★

Naturally, everyone assumed that Old Sam Markham had gold hidden away . . .



SAND STORM

by FLOYD BEAVER

OLD SAM MARKHAM rested on his shovel for a moment and glared up at the dark brown stain spreading across the western sky. Another sand storm was whining in over Sonora's dune country. Already sand was swirling and skittering over the wind-rippled dunes, and the sun was wan and coppery. Old Sam spat and turned back to his digging.

"Working pretty hard down there, oldtimer," a hard voice said over the rising sound of wind-driven sand.

Old Sam straightened to see a lean rider in dusty trail clothes leaning from his saddle and peering down into Old Sam's hole. The stranger smiled at Old Sam, but his eyes remained cold and his right hand rested on the butt of a low-riding frontier Colt. "Wind'll fill that up soon's you turn your back, anyway," the stranger said.

"Ain't filled it in the twenty years I been here," Old Sam said, cheerfully, "figure I can keep her open the next twenty, too."

The stranger laughed with the same cold expression in his eyes. "Can't you find a better place to dig a hole, oldtimer?"

"It ain't the hole," Old Sam said. "It's my bush. The dunes keep trying to cover it up; I ain't a gonna let 'em."

The stranger nudged his horse closer and looked down into Old Sam's hole. It was about twelve feet deep, its sides shored with bits of weathered wood wired in place with rusting baling wire. A shriveled greasewood bush huddled at the bottom of the hole. "Well, I'll be hanged," the stranger said.

"Only bush in two, three miles," Old Sam said proudly, gesturing with his free hand at the barren dunes surrounding them.

"You mean you come out here after

every storm and shovel this thing clear?"

"Been doing it for years."

The stranger looked at Old Sam narrowly. "You must be the old duck I heard about in town."

"They say I was crazy?"

"Among other things," the stranger said.

Old Sam clambered up out of his hole as a gust of wind whipped sand over the mouth of the hole and the stranger's horse shied nervously. "Guess we better be gittin' to cover," Old Sam said. "Looks like this one's gonna be a wampus kitty, for sure."

"Mind if I hole up with you?" the stranger asked. "I don't know much about this neck of the woods."

Old Sam glanced up at the approaching storm. "All right," he said. "I got a shack over against that cutbank. Ride on over, I'll be there directly."

THE STRANGER rode up to Old Sam's shack. It was a haphazard collection of adobe and desert rocks with an even ruder shelter to the right from which Old Sam's burro peered out at the stranger with tired eyes. The stranger slid off his horse, slipped off its saddle and bridle, and shoved it in with the burro.

"Ain't much to look at," Old Sam said above the rising whine of the storm. "Least it'll keep the dust out of your eyes. Come on in."

The stranger stooped to clear the low ceiling inside the shack. For furniture, there were two flat rocks to sit on and an adobe platform for a bed along one wall. A smaller adobe platform in the center of the room was the table. A stack of canteens was Old Sam's water supply.

"Nobody here with you?" the stranger asked.

"Sometimes go for six months without seeing anybody but Jennie," Old Sam said, nodding in the direction of the burro shed.

"Don't see no guns, either," the stranger said.

"I don't need no gun," Old Sam said. "I ain't got nothing anybody'd want."

"Folks in town said you had a pile of gold hid out here somewhere," the stranger said with his cold smile.

"They been saying that about me for years," Old Sam laughed nervously. "Funny, ain't it?"

"Real funny," the stranger said.

"Look. If I had a pile of gold, would I be living like this?" Old Sam indicated the squalid room.

"Like the folks in town said, maybe you're crazy."

"I ain't arguing that," Old Sam said. "But I ain't got no gold. Honest, I ain't." There was terror in the old man's eyes now. His voice cracked.

The stranger faced Old Sam. He was not smiling now, his eyes were hard, and they glittered small and black under the dusty shelf of his brow. The storm howled in full force over the shack and the hissing of sand striking its walls was loud in the tense stillness inside.

"I ain't got no gold," Old Sam said again. "Honest, stranger. I ain't hit color in two years. Old Pablo in town's been staking me for grub."

Sudden as desert thunder, the stranger lashed out with his fist, catching Old Sam in the face, sending him sprawling across the adobe table. "Don't lie to me, old man," the stranger said. "You got gold here, I can smell it. And, come time this storm's over, you'll tell me where it is."

Old Sam pushed himself erect. Blood seeped from a cut on his cheek, soaking up the dust and matting his untrimmed beard. He picked up his hat and sat on the bed, holding his head in his hands.

"What kind of grub you got in this hole?" the stranger asked.

"Canned beans and tomatoes over there by the canteens," Old Sam said without looking up.

THE STRANGER hacked open two cans and ate silently, glancing now and then at Old Sam's huddled form on the bed. The storm continued to howl over the shack, but lulls were coming more frequently. It soon would be over.

"What's the idea spending all that work on that greasewood bush out there?" the stranger asked when he had finished eating.

Old Sam gave no sign that he had heard.

"Answer me, old man," the stranger shouted, hurling his empty plate at Old Sam.

"I don't want the dunes to get it." Old Sam said, "you wouldn't understand."

"That all?"

"When I first hit this country, this was the edge of the dunes. Now, we're two, three miles inside. Me and that little bush is the only things they ain't covered up. I ain't gonna let 'em get it. Not long's I can swing a shovel."

"They wouldn't be anything else in that hole, would there?" the stranger asked quietly. "Something like gold, maybe?"

"No," Old Sam said.

The stranger leaned across the table and slapped Old Sam. "Don't lie to me, old man," he said. "That's where you've buried your gold, ain't it? That's where it is, ain't it?"

Old Sam heaved himself to his feet. He thrust his right hand in front of the stranger's face. "Look at that hand," he said through set teeth, and for a moment he regained the force of a younger man. "Look at that hand! The fingers cut off, one at a time, inch at a time, by Mexican bandits that heard I had gold. I didn't tell them where it was; I won't tell you."

The stranger smiled his cold-eyed smile. "You'll tell me, old man," he said. Old Sam met the cold eyes for a moment; then he seemed to melt before them. He was an old man again.

"I won't tell you," he said, but there was no life in his voice.

It was still daylight when the storm broke. The shrill whine of the wind died away and sunlight slanted through cracks in the shack. Fitful gusts still whipped sand in scattered clouds over the dunes, but the fury of the storm was spent.

"Ready to talk now, old man?" the stranger asked. He got to his feet and stood over Old Sam.

Old Sam shook his head stubbornly. The stranger grabbed Old Sam's crippled hand and whipped it behind his back in a hammerlock. "I said are you ready to talk, old man?" the stranger gritted.

Old Sam groaned. He leaned forward to ease the agonizing strain on his arm, but the stranger steadily increased the pressure. "Talk, old man, or I'll break it," the stranger said.

Old Sam groaned again and pain sweat appeared on his forehead; but he didn't speak. The stranger pressed harder and suddenly Old Sam's age-brittle bones snapped. He screamed once, and his face whitened under its desert grime.

"That's one, old man," the stranger said. "You want to tell me now, or wait 'til I break the other one?"

Old Sam nodded his head, unable to speak for a moment. "All right," he gasped. "All right. I'll tell you where it is."

"It's under the greasewood bush, ain't it?"

Old Sam nodded. He nursed his broken arm to his chest, his teeth set against the pain.

THE STRANGER snatched up the shovel Old Sam had leaned against the door before the storm. "All right, old man. Your hole's probably covered up; you better show me the way."

Old Sam lurched out the door and stumbled through the loose, wind-rippled sand. When he slowed, the stranger shoved him on so hard he all but

fell. "There it is," Old Sam said when at last they reached the hole. The bush was completely buried in the drifted sand and the bottom was at least three feet higher than it had been before the storm.

The stranger's face creased in an expression of mingled greed and satisfaction. "All right, old man," he said. "Grab a shovel. We got a job of digging to do."

"With a broken arm?" Old Sam said. He grimaced with pain and sank onto the sand, his head hanging.

The stranger looked at him for a long minute, his fingers toying with his gun. He tossed the shovel into the hole and dropped lightly after it.

Old Sam looked up as the sand flew from the hole. The stranger worked fast and within thirty minutes he had reached the top of the bush. Old Sam saw its mangled branches thrown out of the hole with the sand and his face set in an expression of savage anger.

His bush, the one he had shoveled tons of sand to save from the encroaching dunes, was being destroyed and its pieces thrown in his face. Tears made dark streaks in the dust on his cheeks and his lips moved with silent curses.

Driven by pain and burning hatred, Old Sam clasped his broken arm to his chest, hunching and sliding over to the hole. The stranger's head was now three or four feet below the top of the hole. Old Sam could see only the shovel and the flying sand.

Painfully, slowly, Old Sam twisted himself about until he could bring his feet against the old scraps of lumber he had used to shore the hole. With his good arm, he reached down and carefully twisted free the baling wire he had used to lash together the supporting boards. Then, with one great convulsive kick, Old Sam knocked away the shoring.

The stranger screamed once, then the desert was still. Old Sam lay, gathering his strength, in the shallow despression formed when the surrounding sand sloughed into the collapsed hole. Then he crawled up to level ground, dragging his broken arm behind him.

Back in his shack, Old Sam bound his arm as best he could and set out, on Jennie, for the long trip into town for a doctor. He led the stranger's horse behind. And like many desert men, Old Sam talked to his burro. "Reckon we'll get enough out of this horse for a stake, Jennie?" he said. "Maybe this time we'll find gold."

★

A "Kirk Lowe" Novelet

by Wade B. Rubottom

HILT-DEEP

A "Nate Stone" Story

by William F. Schwartz

BLOOD WILL TELL OF MURDER

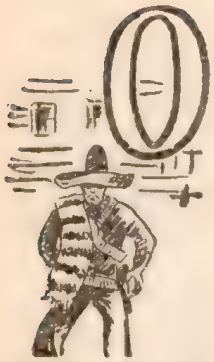
don't miss the March issue of

SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

Extra Feature

DOGTOWN, U.S.A.

by E. E. Clement



ONE OF MY hobbies is to visit restaurants which serve foreign foods. That includes from Swedish to Armenian, and from Spanish to Italian. Every now and then, when we order by the "foreign name" we get served a good old American dish. What would you do if you saw "Chaud Chien de la Praire" on the bill-of-fare? My French may be off, so forgive it please.

Now don't hit the ceiling when you discover that some of our good western ancestors ate prairie dogs; and don't rush to call the S. P. C. A. This is a fact. Probably the best description we have of these little animals comes from George Wilkins Kendall, who accompanied the ill-fated Texan Santa Fe Expedition. Listen to him for a few minutes as he relates what he saw:

"The prairie dog is about the size of the common wild rabbit of the United States, heavier—perhaps more compact—and with much shorter legs. In appearance, it closely resembles the woodchuck or ground hog of the Northern and Middle States, although not more than two-thirds as large. The color is the same, being a dark reddish brown. While the formation of the head and teeth is the same as in all the different species of squirrels, to which family it belongs.

"In their habits, they are clannish, social, and extremely convivial. Never living alone like other animals, but on the contrary, always found in villages or large settlements. They are a wild, frolicsome, madcap set of fellows, when undisturbed. Uneasy and ever on the move, and appear to take especial delight in chattering away the time. And also visiting from hole to hole to gossip and talk over each other's affairs—at least, so their actions would indicate.

"When they find a good location for a village, and there is no water in the immediate vicinity, old hunters say they dig a well to supply the wants of the community. On several occasions I crept close to their villages, without being observed to watch their movements. Directly in the center of one of them, I particularly noticed a very large dog, sitting in front of the door or entrance to his burrow. And by his own actions and those of his neighbors it really seemed as though he was the president, mayor, or chief—at all events he was the 'big dog' of the place

"FOR AT LEAST an hour I secretly watched the operations in this community. During that time the large dog I have mentioned received at least a dozen visits from his fellow-dogs which would stop and chat with him a few moments and then run off to their domiciles. All this while, he never left his post for a moment. And I thought I could discover a gravity in his deportment not discernible in those by which he was surrounded. Far is it for me to say that the visits he received were upon business, or had anything to do with the local government of the village. But it certainly seemed so. If any animal has a system of law regulating the body politic, it is certainly the prairie dog.

[*Turn To Page* 110]

For once Ace Larkin had to go into a duel in which he wouldn't win — because he'd lose if he did.

ACES ALWAYS WIN

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

THE ANTE had been raised twice and he had seen both raises because he was holding three aces. But Ace Larkin had suddenly lost interest in the card game and its turn in his favor. This was partly because of her beauty, (he had never seen a pretty girl west of Chicago, anyway) but more due to the single-action Colt she had leveled at his vested chest.

His fellow players, an oily dude, two burly miners and a deputy sheriff, put down their hands, too—card hands, that is. She was pushing forward, gingham and all, the .44 way out in front and still trained on Ace Larkin. He didn't move an inch, because he could see that she was nervous; she hadn't ever held a gun in that soft, delicate hand before, by the look of her. That made her deadlier than any professional; the hand was shaking.

He regarded her coolly out of ageless eyes. Too many men had gone down before his own guns for him to blink in the face of death.

The dude's face had turned a waxen hue under his ridiculously tall beaver; his round, unschooled eyes swivelled desperately and he looked as if he was going to do something foolish. Ace Larkin's booted toe nudged his ankle warningly, below the table top. The tomb-silent saloon waited without breathing. All entertainment had halted; it was the woman's play now, whatever it was.

"Well, M'am," his gaze had never left her face, "what can we gentleman offer you?" The deputy, a professional gunslinger at that, had been too surprised to say anything. A girl with a shooting iron was a novelty—especially a pretty one.

"You're not going through with your plan, Mr. Ace Larkin." It was the first time she had said anything.

"What plan, M'am?" His grave courtesy had contributed no little to his fame.

"You know very well what I'm talk-

ing about, you murderer. Jack Slocum's my brother."

The deputy came to life. "See here, Miss; your brother started the whole thing—"

Her eyes blazed at him now, but the .44 still pointed its long barrel in Ace Larkin's direction. "Did he? Why does the law tolerate this low, crawling killer?" Larkin's smile widened as the law man rushed to his defense.

"Now wait, Miss; I seen the whole rumpus. Ace here was playin' draw poker with your brother, and he musta never learned how because he lost heavy. Then he ups and calls the Ace a cheat—claims Ace drawed bottom to fill an inside straight. That wasn't very smart of him; everybody knows Ace Larkin is the best card player in these parts. You owe Ace an apology. He just laughed it off, when he coulda hit leather; it's serious business callin' a man a cheat with no proof. Then your brother hits Ace across the mouth with his gloves. Now what else could he do but fix a duel with the young hothead; I ask you?"

ACE LARKIN watched her with mounting interest, because the earnest argument had affected her visibly; at least, the muzzle of the gun had dropped several inches. She looked into all their faces and then came back to him; her voice went grim again. "I don't care whose fault it is. Jack is a fool sometimes, but that's all he is. You're not going to fight any duel with him, Mr. Larkin. It would be suicide for him—and you know it better than anyone."

"That's plumb keerect." One of the miners had stirred in his chair, his grizzled face revealing some uneven, yellow teeth in an expanse of beard. "Ace has the deadest draw in five states."

"In the whole country, mebbe," amended the second miner. With the change of tenor in the scene, the dude had regained his composure and made a show of nonchalantly sauntering away to the bar.

The Ace lifted a broad, flat hand.

"Gentlemen, you over-rate me. Miss Slocum, will you please have a seat and kindly put down that gun? It distresses me to see such beauty impeded by a sordid object." His coolness had its effect so that—with little effort but much speed—his hand shot out and twisted the gun deftly away from her trigger finger before she could stop him. He reversed the thing so that it was now aimed at her.

She stared at him, open-mouthed for an instant. That was all; then the red flushed in her full cheeks and her pretty mouth pinched with fury. She turned away and stormed angrily from the place. The crowd that had gathered around the little scene made room for her flying skirts.

He eyed his companions and set his cards face up.

"The hand was called before the untimely interruption, I believe; I have three aces." The rest of them admiringly flung down their inadequate hands and he drew a pile of chips into his immediate area. That broke up the game.

"Ace, you're a caution."

"How so, Carson?"

The deputy, Carson, smiled. "That young lady looked fit to be tied, and you were as cool as seven Indians near a waterfall."

The gambler drew a thin, crooked cigar from one vest pocket and bit on the end of it. "I never would have drawn on her, Carson. It was an unusual situation to say the very least. So that's young Slocum's sister; she's a real beauty."

"Sure is," agreed Carson. "You goin' through with this shootin' match? I know it's perfectly legal; nothin' I can do to stop you—wouldn't stop you if I had the right to. That squirt needs a lesson."

He knew it was a foolish question. Men like Ace Larkin had reputations

to live up to. If I didn't keep this little appointment with Slocum, he'd lose face and as a result be dead game for every gunslinger with notching habits. The Ace had built his reputation by beating eleven other men to the draw, all fair and square. The fights had been put upon him, and that factor made him a Titan indeed. Men respect a man who, when forced into a fight, does all right for himself.

Ace Larkin, gentleman, gunfighter, and gambler, said, "I have an idea about all this. What time is it?"

"Just about time, Ace; I think you set this one for noon, didn't you?"

"I did. Twelve noon in the town square. I come walking north, he comes south. He was very serious about the whole thing."

Carson shook his head as the gambler drew his pistol, checked its full cylinders and replaced it in the holster strapped about his dapper waist. He smoothed out his frock coat, fingered the brim of his stiff, black hat and started for the door. The deputy accompanied him as far as the dusty street. "I'll keep an eye on you from here."

"Do that; I'll be back shortly to join you in a drink." He panthered up the sun-scorched street, his hands well out from his hips in the ready position. The deputy watched him go with the admiration that a lawman can have for an acknowledged outsider. Soon, the jaunty elegance of Ace Larkin had reached the gentle curve up ahead and disappeared from view. Carson sighed and tugged a pack of makings from his shirt pocket.

THE STREETS were deserted because of the imminence of the duel, but more than one pair of eyes peered furtively from around rain barrels, shaded windows, or the tops of the low, wooden buildings. The word had telegraphed rapidly, of course; and even down at the local funeral parlor, Old Andy was drawing up a crude wooden box to Jack Slocum's physical specifications. Why in tarnation did the Ace's enemies always have to be so tall? It wouldn't be long now: Just a matter of the Ace sighting his man.

It wasn't. A single shot rapped out in the stillness. Carson's head was bent in spilling loose tobacco onto the cheap white paper but he was listening intently. *Crack! Crack! Crack!*

He held up four fingers and waited.

Crack! Crack!

Six shots. He'd heard enough gunfire to catalogue any weapon at short enough ranges; he was enough of a deputy to know that all six blasts had come from the same type gun. A .44 would be close enough. His brow furrowed in sudden alarm.

He had just remembered that Ace Larkin had always frowned on .44's and vowed he would never use one. Claimed they misfired more often than not. That meant one of two things—

Again, he tensed, waiting for the answering fire; but none sounded. Dumbfounded, he wondered if Larkin hadn't overplayed his hand. What if he let the kid get first blood on him? Such a thing was unthinkable, of course, but every gambler loses on a turn of the wheel.

The street was deathly quiet as he ate up the ground to the town square. Only the jingle of his spurs kept pace with the chaos of his thoughts. He hoped he wasn't too late—suddenly the figure of Ace Larkin loomed before him. He drew up sharp to avoid running into him.

The Ace was a mass of dust from head to foot; his frock coat was spattered from contact with the ground and his favorite black hat had a crushed appearance. One sleeve had a huge, fresh tear at the elbow, and the usually-groomed ensemble of the famed gambler seemed only a memory.

Carson's habitual taciturnity deserted him. "Larkin! What in the name of time—you hit?"

Ace Larkin reset his hat firmly on

his touseled head and smiled. "No; I am—in spite of what you see—quite all right. Slocum should really learn more about the use of the .44 at close range."

"I counted six shots—"

"You were correct." He was brushing off his sleeves with great concern. "He emptied his gun in my general direction and I imitated a rabbit, using the General Store as a briar patch. The place looks as if the James gang had paid a call."

The deputy wasn't following as closely as he wanted to. "You tellin' me, you just let him shoot at you without returning fire?"

"I did." A curious gleam shone in Larkin's eyes. "Miss Slocum's argument made an impression on me; I have no call killing youngsters."

"But that was a fool stunt! What if he drilled you?"

"Young Slocum understood what I was getting at. When his gun was empty, he realized I could have shot him out of hand; but I didn't. So both our honors are clear and we are fast friends."

"Well, I'll be," admired Carson. "Ace, not killin' that kid makes you a bigger man than ever in these parts."

"That's true," agreed Ace Larkin. "But it wasn't so much. You saw his sister, didn't you? After all, Carson, what kind of man would I be if I killed my future brother-in-law?"

★

DOGTOWN, U.S.A.

(*continued from page* 106)

"The first town we visited was much the largest seen on the entire route. Being some two or three miles in length by nearly a mile in width at the widest part. In the vicinity were smaller villages, suburbs of the larger town, to all appearances. We resaddled our horses and set off. Thus ended my first visit to one of the numerous prairie-dog commonwealths of the Far West. We travelled three miles, and then stopped. Finding a dry mesquite, we broke off some of the larger branches, kindled a fire, and cooked for each man a dog. The meat we found exceedingly sweet, tender, and juicy—resembling that of the squirrel, only that it was much fatter."

The prairie dog could also be kept as a pet. Out in Abilene, Josiah Jones was a fat and jolly saloon keeper; for the fun of it, he kept a colony of prairie dogs as pets. The visitors from back East were attracted by the little animals, and they began to offer him five dollar per pair for the prairie dogs. His hobby grew into a big business. He hired small boys to sell the animals to the travellers on the Kansas Pacific.

This year a symposium was held on arid lands and how the destructive trend could be reversed. This much was said about those "cute" little animals:

"In attempting to improve the food supply for the Navajos, the prairie dog was poisoned and destroyed in the area. But to the Navajos, the prairie dog is a delicious morsel. We do not know that cows or sheep can produce as much food with a ton of grass, as can the prairie dog. In fact, rodents have made greater adjustments to the arid zone than any other mammal."

So in our search for good, delicious food, we may take a hint from our Western ancestor. And order "Chaud Chien de la Praire" if and when it appears on the menu.

★

An easy-going saddlemaker, and an honest Mexican were just made to order, when Majestic needed a lawman who could read...

LOBO SIGN

by Harlan Clay

MAJESTIC'S council was in session. The county had to have a sheriff, and they could find no lawman who wanted the job; Majestic's record was too unsavory.

There was only one man they had not asked, and in desperation they now called in "Carefree" Doyle— Carefree who was long on smiles, but short on fighting qualities, the man who built their saddles, mended their boots, who fashioned them fancy belts— Carefree who took life as it came and always with a grin on his long, homely shaped face.

But Carefree showed none of those qualities now. Standing before the troubled ranchers, his face was as serious as theirs; and his big feet shuffled nervously as he bore their scrutiny. No one knew better than Carefree Doyle the gravity of the situation.

"And you think you can boss this county?" The white-haired mayor of Majestic and president of the county board squinted over his glasses at the saddle-maker.

Carefree nodded and a faint tinge of color flushed his cheeks. "I crave to try, Ge'rge."

A suppressed snicker lifted from the throats of the few spectators. No one had ever heard Doyle's voice raised in anger. Here was a peace-loving man who had borne the brunt of the pranksters' jokes, and still managed a smile when customers forgot on purpose to pay him for his services.

But Ty Hammer did not laugh. He said, seriously, "You've been the goat around here for more than six months, Carefree. You haven't even proved that you can shoot a gun, much less hit anything with it. And now sudden-like you've got the guts to tell us you can fill Jud Kervish's shoes."

Carefree knew that one of Vince Braggadore's men was behind him; the

urge to convince these men that he was something besides a good-natured leather worker was strong in him, yet he knew that he could not afford to tip his hand. If word reached Braggadore that the county's new law officer was a lot tougher than he had appeared to be in the past, Carefree's life would end long before he had proved his worth. Stifling the desires that welled up in him a smile lifted the corners of his lips.

"I don't aim to fill Jud Kervish's shoes, Ty. Jud was a big man. He wore a size eight and that's small for a six-footer. Mine are twelves." It was a poor joke, and from the expressions on their faces, Carefree knew it.

The rancher threw up his hands and looked at his colleagues. "Men, I reckon we'll just have to give him a chance."

Cowhands, renegades, men of the town—all had gathered outside to hear the announcement of the new appointment and when Carefree appeared on the planked walk with the sheriff's star pinned on his worn flannel shirt, they were waiting to laugh at him.

Lou Lasser was one of these, a wide-shouldered puncher of the Crossed L brand, and he planted himself directly in front of the new lawman. "Evenin'. Sheriff! Needin' a deputy?"

CAREFREE grinned at him and nodded pleasantly. "That I do, Lou. You honin' for the job? The pay's better than nursin' cows." Carefree had more than one reason for wanting this man in particular as his deputy and fate seemed to be playing into his hands. Lasser drew his wages from Hammer, but he was a pal of Braggadore's; and from the information the new sheriff had gathered in his time here as a saddlemaker, Braggadore was the man behind all the trouble in the county.

Lasser's twin guns cleared leather with a flowing movement of his hands. "If you can dance, Sheriff," he chortled. "If you can do a real buck and wing, I might be interested. Always did crave to learn them steps." One weapon flamed and then the other, two quick shots that kicked up little puffs of dirt close to Carefree's booted feet.

The new sheriff did not stir, except to move one step closer to the puncher, and the small smile creased his lips and wrinkled his blue eyes. "Don't know how to dance, Lou," he said, softly, "and I'm too old to learn now."

Lasser had always been amused at this trick in his repertoire, and it had worked beautifully in the past on other men. But something went wrong with it this time. As he started to thumb the hammers back for a second series of shots, Carefree's fist exploded in his face; Carefree's left crossed to connect with his jaw, and Carefree's right coming up from the region of his thigh sent Lasser flying backward as if a charge of powder had been detonated under his feet. He lay there floundering in the dust like a fish out of water, both guns lost from his clutch by the shock of the sheriff's fists.

WHEN HE dragged himself to a sitting position and looked around him dazedly, the sheriff was trying to help him to his feet. "You ain't fast enough with your fists, Lou, but I'm hoping you're faster with those irons you appear to be so all-fired anxious to trigger. You're hired; go soak your head in the trough and meet me at the sheriff's office."

There was a short, pock-marked Mexican standing by the trough, a coffee-skinned vaquero whose lips were drawn back over white teeth in a derisive smile. The sheriff pointed his finger at him. "You Adan! I'm needin' a posse to ride tonight. I'm pickin' you for one."

"You peeck me." The Mexican's smile widened, and he shook his head in the negative. "Mil gracias, Sheriff, but Adan Gueva have no weesh to ride weeth the grinning boot-mender. These men weel skeen you alive."

[*Turn To Page* 114]

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Carefree looked at him a long moment and then shook his head sorrowfully. "I should have known better than to ask you, Adan. I clean forgot those guns of yours were just for show. You naturally wouldn't want to soil such a nice pair of shiny muzzles and maybe tarnish all that silver. I should 'ave known you were just a mongrel with your tail draggin'."

Surprise bugged the eyes of the few bystanders. Gueva's dark eyes blazed like sudden, wind-fanned fires. His talon-like hands dipped for his holsters in the swift draw that had earned for him the respect of his fellow punchers. The sheriff's right hand blurred as his own weapon sprouted in his fist, beating Gueva's draw with plenty to spare.

"Better grease them holsters a mite more," he chided as the other's hands slowly withdrew from the vicinity of his holsters. Then suddenly Doyle's own weapon was back in its scabbard and he was extending his hand to Gueva. "I'll take all of that back, Adan; I guess if those guns were just for show you wouldn't have reached for 'em so fast."

The new sheriff earned a sudden respect that night. Two ranchers and two other punchers volunteered to join his posse, and one of them was Jud Hammer, the grizzled owner of the Crossed L. With the exception of the rancher, not one of them knew the lawman's plans. Early in life Carefree had learned caution; and in spite of his outward, easy-going appearance, the new sheriff held little trust in his fellow man.

FOR A LITTLE over six months he had kept his own counsel, yet missed no tricks. A leather worker learns many things about his customers and what Carefree learned he filed away in the back of his mind for future reference. When cowhands were ambushed and cows were stolen; when robberies were committed and men killed or wounded; no one took notice of the fact that Doyle arrived on the scene of the crime in time to get the facts. He was too much of a good-natured soul to bother about or suspect.

When Vince Braggadore brought in his boots for a new pair of heels, it had not taken the bootmaker long to discover that the heel had been shot away, and that there were other things about the boots which told their story to one smart enough to read. Jud Hammer owned the Crossed L and had reported stolen stock, and Jud hated Braggadore's guts.

Hammer had seen ingenuity in the sheriff's plans, and he helped to convince the others that they would have to trust Doyle. They had followed him so far blindly across the cholla-speckled flats to the rolling hills and canyons where Braggadore's ranch lay.

When they stopped for a rest, and to water their mounts along the mossy banks of a singing mountain stream, Lou Lasser was the only one who sensed their destination. In a worried voice he demanded, "What's the idea of headin' for the Boxed Diamond, Sheriff?"

Carefree had nothing as yet on the redheaded Braggadore that he could prove in a court of law; but he hoped to find it in these hills, as he had explained to Hammer. As long as the rancher and his tough crew had no inkling of the leather-worker's change of character, Carefree figured he would have better odds. It was the main reason he had started out this night. One man, he knew, had left Majestic with the news of Doyle's appointment; but he had left some time previous to the sheriff's encounter with Lasser and Gueva.

The night air was chill, and when Lasser suggested a fire would help, the sheriff agreed with alacrity. When the flames were leaping up and the men had gathered around it, Carefree answered the Crossed L puncher's question.

[*Turn To Page* 116]

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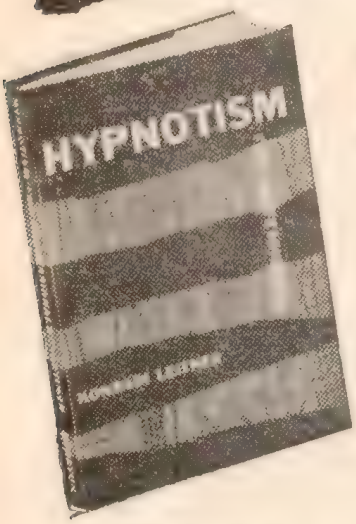

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"I rather hoped that maybe Braggadore or one of his crew might help us, Lou. His ranch is kind of off the beaten track and he's lost some stock, too, to rustlers."

"You're probably wastin' our time," the puncher complained. "How do you know he's there? Maybe he's off visitin' someplace."

The new sheriff decided it was time to put his plan in operation. He did not fail to catch the worry in Lasser's voice, and he knew that the Crossed L puncher had some knowledge of Braggadore's plans for this night. Lasser did not want the sheriff and a posse calling on the man he really worked for.

Reaching over without warning, Carefree pushed Lasser in the face, upsetting him where he squatted on his heels and before the puncher could claw for his guns, the sheriff had him pinned to the ground.

"Take his guns, Adan," he ordered.

THE MEXICAN, eyes alight with curiosity, dragged the long-barreled Colts from their holsters and shoved them into his belt. The other members of the posse were watching narrowly, uncertain just how to proceed. Lou Lasser was Ty Hammer's paid hand, and if anyone was to make the first move and raise an objection it was the rancher.

But Hammer did not speak. He watched silently as the sheriff drew his own weapon, leveled it at his puncher, and said, "I've got enough on you to hang you right now, Lou. If you're honin' to live out your rightful span of years, you'd better talk fast. You haven't played square with Ty. You've been drawin' his wages and helpin' to steal him blind. That was one reason I wanted you as my deputy; I could keep a better eye on you."

Crimson mottled the big puncher's face and he tried to hide his fear under the sullen mask. "You're loco, Sheriff." His glance swung to the rancher's fire-stained face. "You goin' to stand there and let him get away with

[*Turn To Page* 118]

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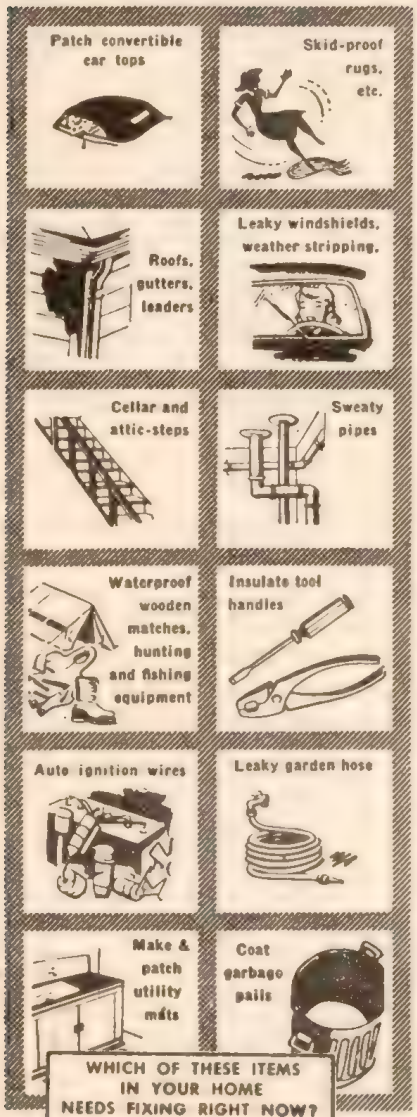

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that kind of talk, Hammer? Cripes! What chance have I got against the pack of you?"

The old rancher did not answer. For a long time he had felt some doubts about Lasser's loyalty, and the lawman's accusation had only served to crystallize them. Lasser, he thought, did not look like an innocent man. His eyes were furtive and frightened, and he kept shifting his eyes from those around the fire to the dark blotch of the trees behind them.

The sheriff's next order surprised them all. "Get your rope, Adan, and bring this coyote's bronc up close."

Hammer growled, "Not so fast, Sheriff. Wearin' the star doesn't give you the right to pass judgment on a man. What you figure to do?"

Carefree gave them a bleak look. "I've watched the law work in this county, Ty, and I'm plumb sick of it. Look at Lasser. He's guilty as hell, and I hope to give some of these hellions around here the proof that decent folk are tired of their thievery. If any of you object to a necktie party, fork your broncs and git."

He saw Hammer's hand sliding down for his gun and he added, quickly, "Don't, Ty; I'll shoot the first man that tries to obstruct my brand of justice. And if you think I can't shoot the eye out of a crow at ten feet, try me."

A tall, sandy-haired puncher climbed to his feet. "The fool's gone loco, Ty; I ain't got no objections to doin' things lawful, but I ain't intendin' to stand by and watch a muley-headed saddlemaker make a fool of himself. Who's comin' with me?"

It was enough. Hammer and three others rose to their feet and with muttered imprecations caught their ponies and headed into the night. Carefree looked at the Gueva, and a grim smile touched his lips.

"What about you, Adan? You want to stay and watch the fun or do you crave to leave?"

[*Turn To Page* 120]

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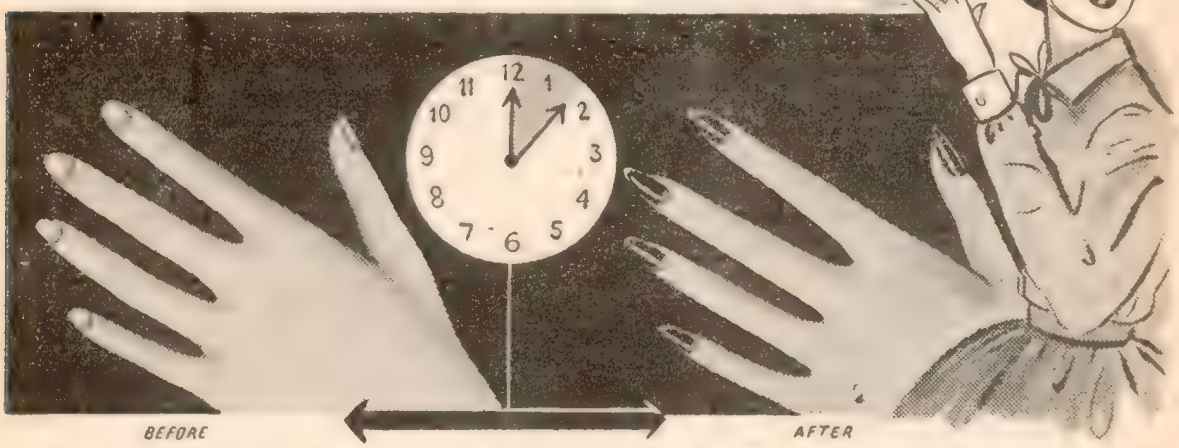

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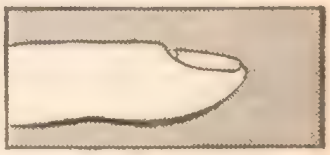

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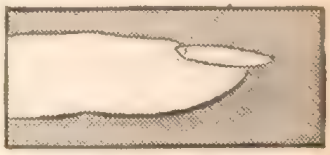

3—When nail hardens, remove nail form and Presto! a longer lovelier nail is yours. Nail is now ready for filing and polishing. Looks and feels completely real.

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Smoothee Co. has discovered a new scientific formula that is not only treatment to lengthen and repair torn nails, but also a method of preventing future embarrassment by helping to put an end to the nail biting habit.
Nails treated with Nail-Gro are so sturdy and tough that teeth simply are not hard enough to bite them. It sure beats putting bandages on fingers, pepper on nails, or other outdated witchcraft. It would appear that the mutilating habit of nail biting will soon be extinct.

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Gueva studied the sheriff's long face for a brief moment, then nodded, and moved silently to his pony. He untied the lariat from the saddle and moved back into the circle of fire. "I theenk, Sheriff, that I weel back your play to the last blue cheep. You want the noose around Senor Lasser's neck, no?"

THE PUNCHER'S face was pasty now and fear had gripped him. Adan Gueva, he knew, had never liked him; and he had played too many horse tricks on the saddlemaker to expect any sympathy from that quarter. Yet he managed to observe an outward calm of snarling anger until Gueva tightened the noose around his neck and the rope had been drawn tight over the branch of a tree.

"Gawd, Carefree," he begged. "I ain't ever done nothin' to you. You sure ain't crazy enough to string me up here?"

"Why not?" Carefree looked at him and the same grin smile touched the corners of his eyes and mouth. "If Ty hadn't thought you were guilty, he'd have stood up for you. This really hurts me more than it will you, Lasser. After you're gone I'll kind of miss those tricks you used to play on me." He sighed heavily and smiled at his aide. "Gueva will too, so we might as well get it over with pronto. Lift him up, Adan."

"I'll talk," Lasser whined, quickly. "Honest to Gawd, Carefree, I didn't have nothin' to do with the killin' of Jud Kervish."

"Then who did?" The sheriff's voice wasn't humorous any longer. It was sharp, brittle as glass, and menacing.

"Vince," Lasser chattered through his teeth. "Braggadore's been bossin' this county. He's got a contract with the Injun reservation for dressed beef. He's been fillin' it from Crossed L and those other ranches to the south. Kervish caught him at it."

The single blast of a gun sent a spanging sheet of sound over the hills.

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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Vince Braggadore, his high body flanked by three bitter-faced gunslingers, stepped into the circle of light. Lasser, shot through the heart, had slumped forward until the rope had tightened, leaving his body at a grotesque angle.

"Lift 'em, Sheriff, and you too, Adan."

The sheriff and Gueva had little choice but to comply. Lasser had implicated Braggadore, but it was doubtful if the evidence would ever reach a court of law now. The Boxed Diamond rancher had four aces and from the grim set of his jaw and the lights that flecked his tawny eyes, both the sheriff and his aide realized that Braggadore intended to play them to the limit. He could not afford to let them go free. He would have to kill them to seal their tongues, just as he had closed Lasser's mouth for good.

"I'd heard they'd made you the sheriff, Carefree," he said, chuckling, "but I figured you had more sense than to pull a boner like this. Why that new star you're sportin' ain't even had time to get tarnished, and here you're finished! That's a shame! You might 'ave made a good lawman too. You were always easy-goin' and 'peared to enjoy life."

Doyle's shoulders drooped and he sighed. "I guess it was a loco move, Braggadore. I should have had more sense than to let Lou talk me into lighting that fire. You wouldn't have known we were comin' otherwise. But go easy, will you? This jigger here has always been the biggest liar in the county. He didn't pull the wool over my eyes; I've known for a long time he was behind all the thievin' and killin' around here. He was just tryin' to get his skirts clean."

BRAGGADORE appeared to mull that over in his mind and the sheriff looked at him hopefully. Gueva's dark face was blank and expression-

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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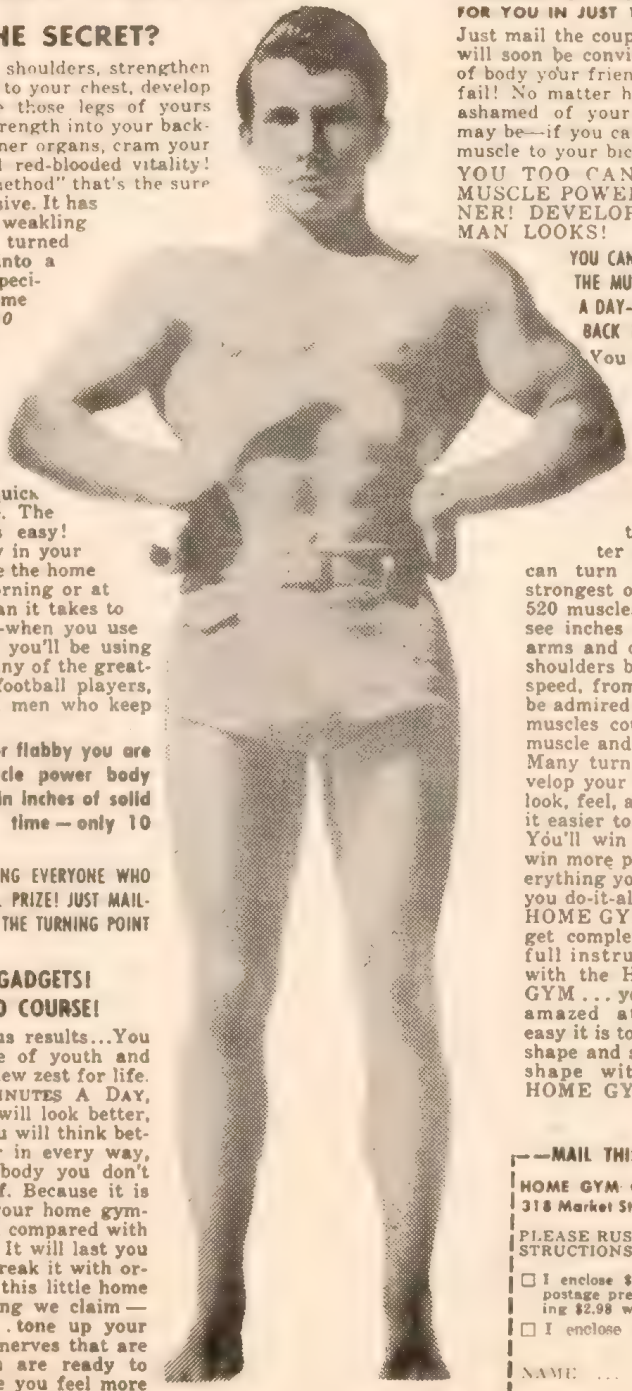

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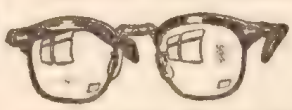

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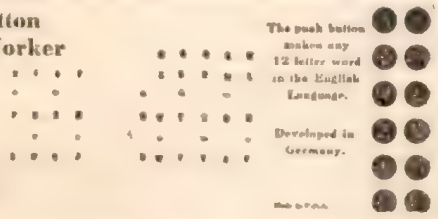

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less. He had seen the new sheriff's prowess with fist and guns; but he was wondering if Doyle had the ability to talk himself out of death too.

One of the Boxed Diamond hands slid around the fire and snaked their guns away from them, taking away their last opportunity to make a bid for their life. That made the aide lose some of his courage. Gueva was no fist-fighter; without his weapons he was just another cowhand. He had no choice but to look to the lawman to get him out of this tight situation.

"Bury that coyote," Braggadore ordered suddenly, nodding toward the dead Lasser, and then he noticed the rope still around the puncher's neck, and he added, "Why bother? That's Gueva's rope. Haul him up in the tree and let him swing in the breeze. The buzzards 'll finish him off tomorrow."

Gunless, the sheriff moved closer to the fire and the big rancher. "You don't need to worry about us, Braggadore. We'll keep our mouths closed."

Braggadore said, "Sure! I know. And there's a Santa Claus. Fork your broncs, you two; I think we'll take a pasear up in the hills to the hide-out. It might look kind of funny to the decent folks, as you call 'em, if they found both your carcasses so close to my spread."

He took no chances on either escaping and had one of his men truss Gueva securely to his saddle; but to show his contempt of the sheriff's courage and ability, he let him ride free-handed; in this manner they climbed higher through the dark corridor of the trees, crossed a mountain meadow, and rode deep into the blackness of a of a rock-walled canyon.

At the black opening of a cave they brought their ponies to a halt and Braggadore asked, "Any of you gents hear anything? Back there a piece it sounded like someone might be following us."

A Boxed Diamond puncher answered, "It's this canyon, Vince. You can hear your own echo for miles."

IT SATISFIED the rancher and they all dismounted. The sheriff felt the cold blast of air that blew against his face and knew that at last he had found Braggadore's hidden passage through the hills. The stone floor beneath his feet was thickly carpeted with manure. The stolen stock had undoubtedly been driven into this hidden canyon and on through the tunnel to some further valley where the brands could be worked over safe from prying eyes.

A lantern flamed to light ahead of him and saw a large, dome-roofed room that was an offshoot of this main thoroughfare. It was out of the chill draft that continually blew here, and was crudely furnished with a table and several chairs and two double-decker bunks that stood against the back wall. One of the Boxed Diamond punchers stuffed the iron stove with kindling and started a fire. In just a moment it was blazing merrily and the heat from it made the room as comfortable as a cabin.

Gueva was forced into a chair and tied to it and Braggadore motioned the sheriff to sit down facing him. He gave orders to the gunsters to go on back to the entrance just in case they had been followed.

Smiling faintly, he regarded the lawman with curious eyes. "I don't get it, Carefree. Have you been hidin' a lion's heart under that lamb's exterior? I knew the county board was hard up for lawman material, but by all the saints I never thought they'd pick you." He looked at Gueva, and shook his head sorrowfully. "You're fast with a gun, Adan, and a good hand with cows. I could have used you on the Boxed Diamond if you hadn't been so squeamish about swingin' a long loop. But it's too late now."

THE OTHER'S dark eyes glowed. "I do not weesh to work for my leeving that way, Senor Braggadore. Adan Gueva ees an honest man." He shrugged

[*Turn Page*]

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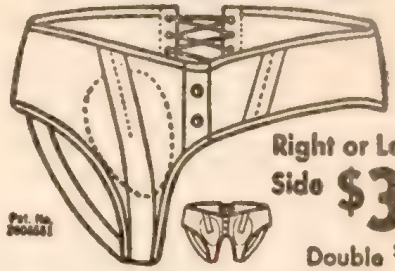

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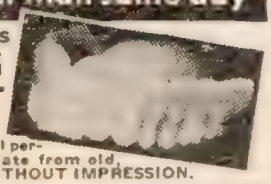

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and looked at the sheriff. "Someday I have to die. Eef the time ees now, Por Dios, I am ready."

Carefree nodded agreement at this philosophy. "Adan said a mouthful. Those are my sentiments exactly, but what I can't figure at all is how you hope to get away with three killings. Lasser's dead, and although I didn't aim to see him die that way, he had it comin' to him. The danged fool's been making a monkey out of me long enough. Course I never did connect you with any of the rustling nor the killing of Kervish; yet the way you killed Lou to shut his mouth looks mighty wrong."

Braggadore said, "There's no harm in your knowin' the truth now, Doyle. You won't either of you live long enough to tell it in court. Lasser told you the truth. I killed Jud. He caught me with a herd of Crossed L cows and I had to do it to protect my own skin. Not that I regretted it; Jud Kervish was no friend of mine and I was gettin' sick of his snoopin' ways."

"What about Gorman?" Carefree asked, carelessly.

"One of my men bushwhacked him at my orders." Braggadore drew his gun and twirled it on his index finger and a smile lifted the corners of his lips to show the strong, white teeth behind them. "Gorman was too honest to make a good sheriff. He got in my way and trod on my toes. I couldn't stand for it. Now if you'd have come to me and showed your willingness to play my game, you could have worn that star a long time, Carefree. You might have died of old age and had plenty of dinero linin' your pockets."

He brought the gun up and sighted along the muzzle at the Mexican. Gueva stiffened, bracing his body for the shock of the bullet. Doyle's muscles tensed and his unbound hands slid surreptitiously beneath the table's edge. From the look in Braggadore's eyes he knew that he could not afford to wait any

[*Turn To Page* 128]

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longer. He saw the rancher's thumb pull back the hammer and with a sudden whispered prayer, he upended the table.

Braggadore had never seen Carefree Doyle, the saddle-maker, fight; nor even show anger and the ferocity of the attack took him off guard. The hammer fell on a live cartridge; the gun flamed, and the slug ricocheted off the rock ceiling. Before Braggadore could recover his balance and try another shot, the sheriff's fingers had clamped around the rancher's wrist and pinioned his hand tight to his side. Carefree's fist slammed into his face with all the power of a hundred and eighty pounds of muscle.

But Braggadore was no novice at rough and tumble fighting and although he lost the gun, he managed to lift his knee into Carefree's groin and bring a loud grunt of pain from him.

"Keel him!" Gueva screamed. "Smash hees teeth een!"

Doyle scarcely heard him. He had never liked the cut of Braggadore's jaw, the color of his eyes, nor the slit of a mouth that had condemned men to death. He went to work with cold efficiency. He beat the rancher's lips to pulp until Braggadore's mouth was dripping crimson. He closed his right eye and smashed blow after blow to Braggadore's kidneys. Groggy, blinded, the rancher fell back and from the tunnel entrance a Boxed Diamond puncher's voice rapped out: "Lift and turn, Sheriff. I'm gut-shootin' you."

SHOCKED by the unexpected appearance of the man whom Ham-

[Turn To Page 130]

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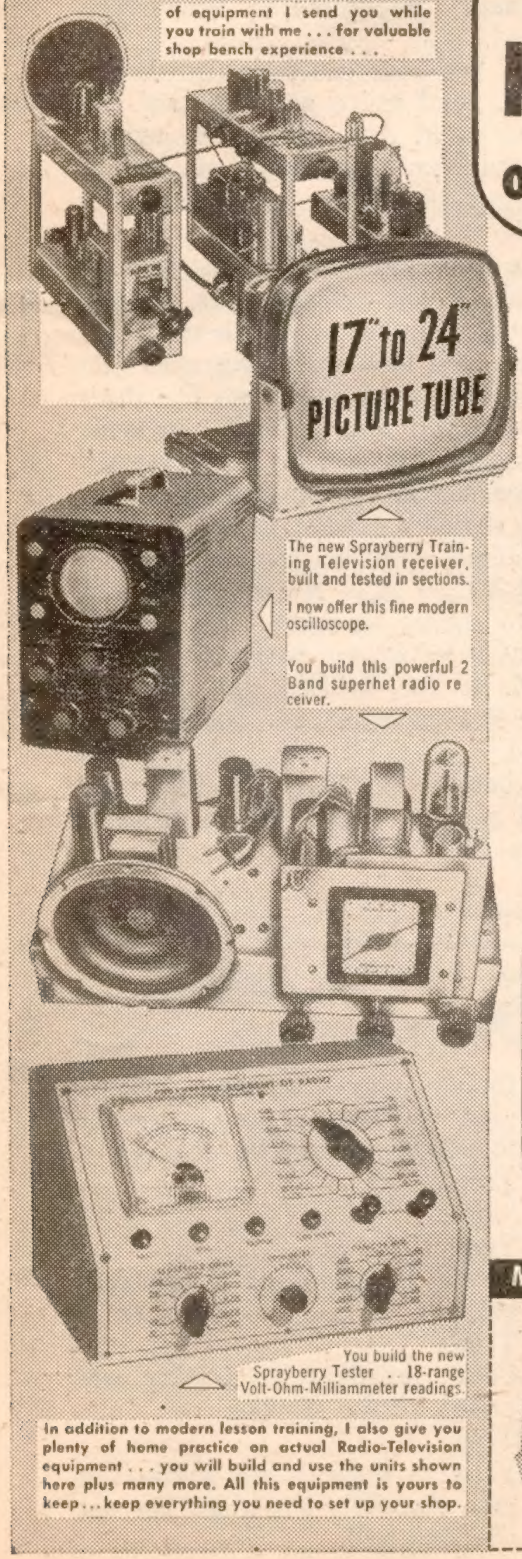

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mer and the rest should have taken care of, Carefree turned with Braggadore's big body as a shield. The cowhand's slug smashed into the rancher's chest, completing Doyle's work for him. The puncher had no opportunity to try again. Braggadore's body, propelled by the sheriff's big shoulders, bowled him over. Carefree stepped on his wrist, wrenched the gun from his hand and knocked him cold with the butt.

A moment later Hammer and the other members of the posse were crowding into the room, and Hammer cheered, "This is what I call a good night's work. Carefree, you sure proved you were right, but I still don't cotton to how you figured Braggadore as the kingpin."

The new sheriff wiped the blood from his face and smiled crookedly for Braggadores's fists had done their damage. "Boots tell a story, Ty I got my first clue when Vince brought in his new Justins to have new heels put on. His ranch is all sandy loam and the mud that stuck to his soles was adobe. Your spread is mostly that clay soil. I knew that you hated him and that he wouldn't come within twenty miles of your ranch unless he was up to no good. And one heel had been shot off, not broken."

"That's no proof," Braggadore grittted.

"No, but your confessin' is," Doyle replied, "and we've got more an' one witness to it. And unless I'm wrong, Hammer saw you shoot Lou Lasser. It seems like every crook leaves a trail."

The Mexican, untied now, looked at the sheriff with puzzled eyes. "Thees I steel do not understand, Shereef. You do the good boot work, but steel you handle thees guns and feests like thees professional. I theenk maybe you come to Majestic just for thees purpose, no?"

Carefree reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. "Right, amigo. I served two hitches with the Rangers, and Jud Kervish used to be my saddle mate. I had to square accounts." He grinned now at them all and part of it was directed at the bruised and battered Vince Braggadore. "Now that I'm here I kind of think I'll stay. I got a hunch that sheriffin' in this county isn't goin' to be near so unpleasant as it's been in the past."

★

ANSWERS To The Range Terms Quiz

1. True.
2. False; a nester is a homesteader who settles on government land.
3. True.
4. False; a bronco is a wild or semi-wild horse.
5. True.
6. False; sunfishing consists of twisting the body from right to left during jumping.
7. True.
8. False; to fork a horse is simply to straddle him.
9. False; a maverick is an unbranded animal.
10. False; a waddy is a cowpuncher.
11. False; originally a cayuse was an Indian pony—the term is now used to designate any horse, or sometimes an inferior one.
12. True.
13. True.
14. True.
15. False; a hot-roll is a cowboy's bed-roll.
16. True.
17. False; tapaderos are leather coverings for the stirrups.
18. True.
19. False; a dogie is any motherless calf, especially one which has not wintered well.
20. True.

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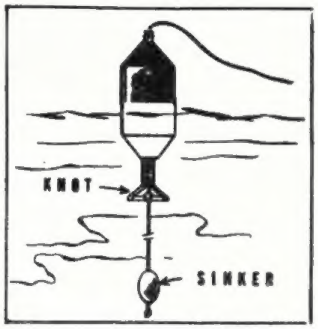

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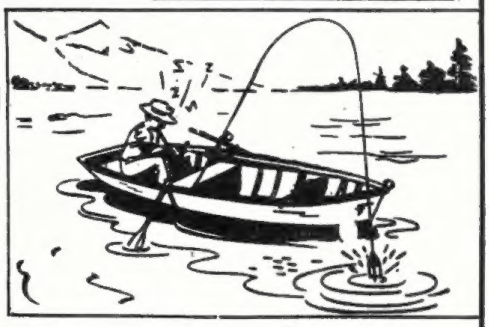

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